

# Thomas Aquinas on the Place of the Jews in the Divine Plan

by Marcel Dubois

If the expressions used by Thomas Aquinas in speaking of the Jews sometimes seem severe or pejorative, it would be a mistake to see this as a sign of an anti-Judaism of principle. In order to understand the significance of these remarks and to grasp their true implications, one must place them in their proper context.

In this regard, a fact that should be pointed out immediately because of its especial importance for our purposes, is that the references to Jews or Judaism never appear in a context of polemics or missionary activity. Thomas never wrote a treatise "Against the Jews" or a manual for the conversion of the Jews, although in some sections of Christianity there was a quite flourishing literature of this kind at that period. Of course, he could be not ignorant of the fact that in his time, in the heart of the Christian world, there lived Jewish communities that were separated by their singular existence, and isolated by the ostracism of the laws of society. This persistent presence of the people of the Bible was doubtless for him, as formerly for Augustine, a cause for astonishment. Nevertheless, the questions to which this gave rise were never posed by him in a confrontational manner, but as part of a theological reflection on the mystery of the divine plan. It was in a perspective of wisdom that Thomas considered the Jewish people. Its vocation, its permanence, its destiny only seemed to him explicable within the development of the history of salvation.

Although in relation to the mystery of Christ and the Church Judaism appeared as a different and above all superseded system, Thomas did not present the transition from the Old to the New Testament as a simple rupture. On the contrary, he perceived in it the lines of continuity of the religious adventure in which God, from the calling of Abraham to the advent of the Kingdom, had engaged humanity.

---

The French original of this article was translated by David Maisel.

This perspective of wisdom was presented in all its amplitude in the two great syntheses elaborated by Thomas, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*. In the light of the comprehensive vision to be found in both these works, aspects of the Jewish reality which sometimes seem opposed to the point of contradiction appear as integral parts of a complex unity, as different elements which gain intelligibility through the operation of a single dynamism. Here and there, to be sure, it is a *Christian* synthesis. Yet the fulfillment of the plan of God in Jesus Christ does not have to entail, as a necessary and painful consequence, a view of Judaism that is purely pejorative. The very intention of these two works causes Thomas to hold together, distinguishing without disuniting, that which appears to be a renewal or even a rupture and that which reveals the continuity of the same divine purpose.

## The Nature of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*

We should first of all point out that, despite the interpretation that has often been given to its title, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was not a polemical work or a missionary manual. As R.A. Gauthier showed in a remarkably well-documented study,<sup>1</sup> it was above all a work of wisdom. In order to support this thesis, which is also mine, it is important to recall its argument.

For a long time it was commonly believed that Thomas wrote the *Summa Contra Gentiles* at the request of Raymond of Peñafort, former General of the Order of Saint Dominic, for Dominican brothers who were to be missionaries among the Moors. His purpose, it was said, was to provide them with a compendium of errors to disprove and arguments to use in preparation for their task of evangelization.

This idea, which became particularly persistent, began with a text of the chronicler Peter Marsili in the *Commentarium de Gestis Regis Aragonum Jacobi Primi, libris quattuor*, which he offered to King Jaime II of Aragon on the Feast of the Trinity, 1314.<sup>2</sup> The king had asked him to write the history of his grandfather, Jaime I, the Conqueror (1213–1273). It was impossible to write such a chronicle without speaking of Raymond of Peñafort, who enjoyed friendly relations with the sovereign. In this way Marsili, the historian of Jaime I, became also the biographer of Raymond, to whom he devoted chapters 47–49 of Book IV of his chronicle.

It was in this context that Marsili came to speak of the role played by the former general of the Dominican order in the writing of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. This is how he described the event:

Thus, inflamed with the desire for the conversion of the heathen, Brother Raymond begged the celebrated Doctor of Holy Scriptures and Master of Theology, Brother Thomas Aquinas, his colleague in the Order of Preachers, who was regarded as the greatest scholar in the world after Brother Albert the philosopher, to write against the errors of the pagans a work that would dissipate the shadows of darkness and reveal the doctrine of the sun of truth to those who wished to believe. This famous mas-

---

1. See R.A. Gauthier's introduction to *Saint Thomas d'Aquin: Contra Gentiles*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1961), pp. 7–123, esp. "L'Intention," pp.60–69.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

ter did as humbly requested by the eminent father, and he wrote the summation called *Contra Gentiles*: a summation that, as is unanimously agreed, has never been equaled in its kind.<sup>3</sup>

It was on the basis of this text by Marsili that a missionary intention was ascribed to the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. A whole literature passed on this conviction, which became current to the point of being accepted as a commonplace.<sup>4</sup>

Gauthier has relativized, in a way that seems to me convincing, the authority that was thus ascribed to Marsili's testimony. In the text just cited, Marsili related a disclosure that was doubtless made some ten or fifteen years after the event and was written down only thirty-five or forty years later. Some confusion must have slipped into his mind, and the fervor of the hagiographer got the better of the chronicler's memory. In his desire to reveal the universality of Raymond's apostolic charity by describing his missionary initiatives toward the "infidels," Marsili drew attention to his role in the conversion of the Jews and Moors through the creation of schools of languages in Tunis and Murcia for the brethren of his order. Carried away by his eulogy, he permitted himself to ascribe to Raymond's inspiration a work that seemed to him to have been motivated by the same intention: the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

As Gauthier pointed out, it is remarkable that the other contemporary writers who mentioned Raymond and Thomas were silent about an initiative that ought to have made an impression upon them. Moreover, Thomas himself did not mention the fact, whereas if he had really written the *Summa Contra Gentiles* at Raymond's request, the usage of the period would have required that he dedicate it to him.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the manuscript tradition shows no trace of a letter of dedication. Thomas' very silence thus contradicts Marsili's testimony and, according to Gauthier, is sufficient to invalidate it. In short, he concluded, Peter Marsili "simply yielded to the common temptation of hagiographers in ascribing to his saint an event with which he had nothing to do."<sup>6</sup>

To these arguments of an external nature Gauthier added others, based on the *Summa Contra Gentiles* itself, which seemed to him even more decisive:

---

3. In the original Latin:

Conversionem etiam infidelium ardentem desiderans, rogavit eximium doctorem sacrae paginae, magistrum in theologia fratrem Thomam de Aquino eiusdem ordinis, qui inter omnes huius mundi clericos, post Albertum philosophum, maximus habebatur, ut opus aliquod faceret contra infidelium errores; per quod et tenebrarum tolleretur caligo et veri solis doctrina credere volentibus panderetur. Fecit magister ille quod tanti patris humilis deprecatio requirebat, et Summam, quae contra gentiles intitulatur, condidit, quae pro illa materia non habuisse parem creditur.

See Fr. Balme and C. Paran, *Raymundiana seu Documenta quae pertinent ad S. Raymundi de Pennaforti vitam et scripta* (Rome, 1898), p. 12; J. Rins Serra ed., *San Raymundo de Peñafort: Diplomatorio* (Barcelona, 1954), p. 341. Cf. Gauthier, p. 61.

4. For a bibliography of previous studies of the topic, see Gauthier, p. 60. We shall refer esp. to M.D. Chenu, *Introduction à l'étude de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris and Montreal, 1950). Persons familiar with Chenu's book will recognize the frequent allusions to it made by Gauthier (esp. p. 99), who respectfully but firmly contradicts its thesis.

5. Gauthier, pp. 63–64.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

“Before consulting Peter Marsili, one should have consulted Saint Thomas himself, and one would have seen, as M.M. Gorce correctly observed, that his text completely rules out the missionary purpose that has been gratuitously ascribed to it.”<sup>7</sup> Gauthier thought this could be seen from Thomas’ attitude to the Muslims:

The very text of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, first of all, precludes a missionary purpose in the narrow sense of a mission to the Moors. If Thomas had intended to write a manual for the preparation of missionaries to Muslim countries, one would have to admit that his work failed completely and that it betrayed a singular lack of knowledge and judgment on his part. Such a manual would have had to have given first place, among the errors to be refuted, to the errors of the Koran and the Muslim theologians.<sup>8</sup>

Gauthier pointed out that in Thomas’ period enough information existed to allow one to write such a compendium. There was no lack of tools with which to gain a sufficiently deep and precise knowledge of Muslim theology. Apart from the two Latin translations of the Koran — that of Robert of Ketton (1143) and the more accurate one of Mark of Toledo (1209–1210) — Peter of Poitiers and, above all, Peter the Venerable<sup>9</sup> had gathered around this basic text a group of documents that elucidated it. Within the Dominican order itself, a few years before Thomas wrote the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Vincent of Beauvais had devoted a few chapters of his *Speculum Maius* to Muhammad.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas’ thinking, however, was in no way on this level or in accordance with this perspective. Here and there in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* one does indeed find a few refutations of the errors of the Koran. Yet it is always in connection with some particular point: corporal beatitude in heaven, for instance,<sup>11</sup> or the wholly human propagation of the Koran as opposed to the wholly supernatural propagation of Christianity.<sup>12</sup> There is nothing in these allegations which goes beyond the commonplace. In his refutation of points of doctrine, he seems to have known them only indirectly and by hearsay. In short, “even if Saint Thomas had read the Koran, which has by no means been proved, he did not take it upon himself to refute it in detail.”<sup>13</sup>

No more than with the Koran, moreover, does Thomas seem to have concerned himself with the teachings of Muslim theologians, preachers and com-

---

7. Ibid., p. 65. Cf. M.M. Gorce, “La Lutte ‘Contra Gentiles’ à Paris au XIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle,” in *Mélanges Mandonnet* (Paris, 1930), p. 229; *L’Essor de la pensée au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1933), p. 242.

8. Gauthier, p. 66.

9. Cf. M.Th. d’Alverny, “Deux traductions latines du Coran au Moyen Age,” *Recherches d’Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age* 16 (1947–48), 60–131; “Quelques manuscrits de la ‘Collectio Toletana,’” in *Petrus Venerabilis* (Studia Anselmiana 40; Rome, 1956), pp. 202–218; J. Kritzeck, “Peter the Venerable and the Toledan Collection,” *ibid.*, pp. 176–201.

10. Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Historiale* XXIII:39–67; *Speculi Maioris Vincentii Burgundi* ..., vol. 4 (Venice, 1591), ff. 313v–317v.

11. Gauthier, p. 67. Cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles* (henceforth: CG) III:27 and IV:83.

12. Gauthier, p. 67.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

mentators. On four or five occasions he specifically refuted the errors of these theologians, but he knew them only through Maimonides and Averroes. These allusions to the religious thought of Islam constitute neither the substance nor the framework of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. "In the final analysis, they are so unimportant that they could easily be suppressed without in the least altering the harmony of the work."<sup>14</sup>

That this was not Thomas' purpose becomes especially clear if one compares the *Contra Gentiles* with the explicitly polemical systematic treatises written a few years later by members of his order engaged in the encounter with Islam: the *De Statu Saracenorum et Mahomete Pseudo-Propheta Eorum et Eorum Lege et Fide* of William of Tripoli (1273), and the *Improbatio Alcorani* of Ricoldo of Montecroce (beginning of the fourteenth century).<sup>15</sup> The very fact that these works were written such a short time after the appearance of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* shows that they fulfilled a need to which Thomas had had no intention of responding.

It may be insisted or objected that the Arab philosophers, and Avicenna and Averroes in particular, occupy an important place in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, where they are often cited and refuted. To this it may be answered that those references only tend to confirm the theoretical and detached nature of Thomas' work. It was certainly not on this level that the missionaries in Islamic countries encountered the masses of the Muslim faithful. William of Tripoli, one of those who knew the Muslim world best at that period,<sup>16</sup> observed that the Saracens were generally simple folk with whom there was little need to engage in philosophical arguments.

In addition, one should remember that in the Muslim world itself the influence of Avicenna and Averroes was very limited. Their doctrines and attitudes were disputed. The political authorities were sometimes obliged to ban them from the community<sup>17</sup> because the doctors of Islam were opposed to them, and it was these preachers of the Koran who commanded the attention of the masses. Thus when Thomas refuted the doctrines of Arab philosophers, he was certainly not preparing collections of arguments for the use of missionaries in Islamic countries. On the contrary, his intention was decidedly speculative. His discussion with the Arab philosophers was above all a dialectical search for truth for the purpose of creating a work of wisdom.

The arguments produced by Gauthier against the traditional theory are convincing. By his critique of the use that was made of Marsili's text, he liberated the *Summa Contra Gentiles* from an attractive but erroneous legend. The debate, however, is not yet over. While questioning the authority of Marsili, some Thomist scholars have thought that the interest in Arab doctrines shown

---

14. Ibid.

15. Cf. B. Altaner, *Die Dominikanermissionen des 13. Jahrhunderts* (Hebelschwerdt, 1924), pp. 85–87; U. Monneret de Villard, *Lo studio dell'Islam in Europa nel XII e nel XIII secolo* (Studi e Testi 110; Vatican, 1944); *Il libro della Peregrinazione delle parti d'Oriente di Frate Ricoldo da Montecroce* (Rome, 1948), pp. 91–118.

16. Altaner, pp. 85–86.

17. Gauthier, p. 69.

in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* could be explained by another polemic, an internal one that was not oriented toward missionary efforts.

If Saint Thomas was interested in these thinkers, it was precisely because his gaze was not turned toward the lands of Islam, but toward the lands of Christendom; it was because he was intending to prepare the scholars in Western universities for the struggle against the invasion of the errors of Arab philosophy. The *Summa Contra Gentiles* thus remains the instrument of a mission, but of an internal mission. It remains a work of apologetics, but of university apologetics.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the brilliant advocates this theory had at a certain period,<sup>19</sup> it has hardly any credit today. Gauthier showed that it was based on a historical error: that of pre-dating the Averroist crisis, the threat to Christian doctrine that was perceived in certain interpretations of Aristotle that derived from Averroes. The heterodox Aristotelianism of Siger of Brabant which, according to this theory, was the occasion of this controversy, had not yet made its appearance at the period when Thomas began to undertake the project of *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Thus, "no more than with the Moors, of whom he was scarcely thinking, was Saint Thomas concerned in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* with convincing the Averroist masters, who did not exist."<sup>20</sup>

Gauthier exploited this debate in order to confirm his thesis by showing that not only was the *Summa Contra Gentiles* not a missionary work, but it was not a polemic work either. It was through basing oneself wrongly on the traditionally accepted title "Contra Gentiles," which occurs explicitly in most manuscripts, that it had come to be believed that Thomas had written this work "against the pagans." It was not only the pagans who were envisaged, however, but all infidels: Jews and Christian heretics as well as *pagani*. Moreover, the beginning of certain manuscripts supports this view by offering another title, which could well be the correct one: "Book of the Truth of the Catholic Faith against the Errors of the Infidels" (*Incipit liber de veritate catholicae fidei contra errores infidelium editus a fratre thoma de aquino ordinis fratrum praedicatorum*).<sup>21</sup>

According to Gauthier, this title is entirely in keeping with the contents of the work as a whole, "for in this text it is the errors of all the infidels which are refuted: those of the pagans, those of the Jews and those of the heretics."<sup>22</sup> Through a careful examination of the doctrines mentioned or opposed by Thomas, Gauthier showed that "those infidels whose errors Thomas undertook to refute were not so much the infidels *of his time* as the infidels of *past times*:

---

18. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

19. Cf. Gorce, "La Lutte," pp. 223–243; "L'Essor," pp. 262–263; P. Peret, *Bulletin Thomiste* 3 (1930–33), 105–112.

20. Gauthier, p. 71.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 75. In this whole debate, Gauthier bases himself upon the writings of P. Salman: "Note sur la première influence d'Averroès," *Revue Néoscholastique* 40 (1937), 203–212; "Jean de la Rochelle et les débuts de l'averroïsme latin," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 24 (1935), 38–64; "Sur la lutte Contra Gentiles de saint Thomas," *Divus Thomas* 40 (1937), 488–509.

22. Gauthier, p. 75.

pagans, Jews and heretics dead for centuries, whom there could be no question of converting!"<sup>23</sup> The passages analyzing or criticizing the positions of these *antiqui* or even *antiquissimi* thus in no way sprang from contemporary controversies or debates.

If one considers this timeless quality, it becomes all the more clear that it was not an immediately polemical work. Hence the title "Book of the Truth of the Catholic Faith..." quite clearly expresses its meaning and content:

He made the first object of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* the truth of the Catholic faith, and it was only secondarily that he mentioned the errors of the infidels.... The purpose, and the sole purpose, of Saint Thomas was to write a work of theological wisdom through meditating on the truth of the faith. But Aristotle declared that one could not study the truth without studying error.... Saint Thomas yielded to this logical requirement and to this example, and precisely because he wished to consider the truth, he refuted error.<sup>24</sup>

If the *Summa Contra Gentiles* had a polemical character, said Gauthier, it was not because of historical circumstances but owing to an inner necessity that existed in the very nature of theological science. This polemic was situated outside time and was not aimed at contemporaries who were to be converted or against whom one had to defend oneself.

In this respect, it is sufficient to compare the *Summa Contra Gentiles* with the apologetic or missionary form of refutation practiced by many writers of the period. The works of the latter are interesting for the historian because they present, as in a mirror, the systems and doctrines against which they were attempting to fight. On the other hand:

The *Summa Contra Gentiles* was certainly of no immediate use to the apostles of the thirteenth century, and no historian would think of reading it today. As a work of theology, it was not in its time concerned with the present, and it does not evoke the past for us. But, then as now, it invited the reader to perceive, through a timeless contemplation, the truth of the faith and the falsity of the error that was opposed to it.<sup>25</sup>

In short, as Gauthier stated in a phrase that sums up his whole theory: "Because it corresponded to an eternal need, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* is forever actual."<sup>26</sup>

This theory has recently received strong support from Michel Corbin's major work on the theological path followed by Thomas.<sup>27</sup> Corbin saw the *Summa Contra Gentiles* as a stage in the internal development of Thomas' theological reflection: "It is part of the same theological scheme as the commentaries on Lombardus and Boethius, and represents a more advanced stage in the realization of that scheme."<sup>28</sup> Between the commentary on the *Sen-*

---

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., p. 91.

25. Ibid., p. 99.

26. Ibid., p. 123. Evidently, Gauthier has Chenu in mind.

27. Michel Corbin, *Le Chemin de la théologie chez Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris, 1974).

28. Corbin, p. 570.

tences and the *Summa Theologiae*, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was a “second theological treatise”<sup>29</sup> or indeed a “total theological treatise”<sup>30</sup> in the course of an “ordered and irreversible” path.<sup>31</sup> In this respect, Corbin’s long and careful demonstration confirmed from within, on the plane of theological necessity, the arguments for which Gauthier provided plentiful historical evidence. For the one as for the other, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* did not have an apostolic purpose but a purpose of wisdom.

At this point, however, we seem faced with a fresh puzzle. If the theory of a missionary or polemical purpose is so implausible, why did it command such widespread credence? Could it, while mistaken, nevertheless reflect some significant aspect of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*?

It is correct to emphasize the theoretical character of the purpose of wisdom which inspires the whole of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* from the prologue onwards. Even so, it would seem that in insisting so absolutely on the disinterested — today we should say “uninvolved” — character of the work, insufficient attention has been paid to the polemical quality of the various titles it has been given, be it *Contra Gentiles* or *Contra Infideles*. It was Corbin himself who wrote: “The *Summa Contra Gentiles* was the only great Thomist theological work that placed so much emphasis on errors.”<sup>32</sup> Whatever illusions or exaggerations there may have been, may there not have been some well-founded perception in those theories which insist on the work’s missionary or polemical aspect? If the purpose of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was exclusively one of wisdom, how could it be distinguished from the *Summa Theologiae*, which is universally recognized as an ordered synthesis of the truth of the faith?

An assiduous reader and commentator of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Albert Patfoort, felt uncomfortable with too decisive a solution to the problem.<sup>33</sup> He noticed that a presentation of the work in terms of “either-or” — either a polemic or else a work of wisdom — did not enable one to gain an adequate impression of the nature of this original work. Based on a very careful internal analysis of the various interlocutors introduced by Thomas and all the nuances of the arguments that he used against them, Patfoort discovered a middle way which seems to me to represent the most balanced solution. He recognized what was valid in each of the two competing theses. The formula that he proposed as a title for the whole work — “A Course of Presentation of the Faith to the Infidels” — seems to me as apt as it is objectively true.

As a “presentation of faith,” the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was as serene, as certain, as contemplative as the *Summa Theologiae*, but as a presentation “to the infidels,” it showed “a real and profound concern about the judgment of the infidels regarding the mysteries of the faith.” Both of the *Summae* are concerned with a *demonstrativa veritas*, a demonstrable rather than a merely

---

29. *Ibid.*, p. 626.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 630.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 630 and 662.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 488.

33. Albert Patfoort, “La Somme contre les Gentiles: Ecole de présentation de la foi chrétienne aux infidèles,” in *Thomas d’Aquin: Les Clés d’une théologie* (Paris, 1983).



revealed truth. But what gave the *Summa Contra Gentiles* its particular method and purpose was that here there was a “presentation to the infidels, taking account of the way in which they themselves approached them, of the points of the Christian faith to which the *demonstrativa veritas* bore witness.”<sup>34</sup> It was a work of wisdom whose certitude found its justification within the faith itself, but which turned toward the exterior with the intention of forestalling the other party, either meeting him on a terrain where one shared the same truth, or else presenting him with the essence of the faith in such a way as to render it intelligible to him.

Patfoort concluded that the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was “a work conceived with non-Christians and infidels in mind, but addressed to Christians called upon to enter into contact with infidels, to forestall their objections and to present them with the Christian doctrine in such a way as to show that it met their difficulties and largely coincided with their own convictions.”<sup>35</sup> He was so bold as to describe it as “an attempt before its time at ecumenism between Christians and infidels,”<sup>36</sup> or again as “a frank dialogue with the infidel.”<sup>37</sup>

The infidels who had to be taken into account, or who had to be encountered, differed very much. The same instrument of thought was not to be employed for every type of truth. The first nine chapters of the first book, which Patfoort rightly described as a “discussion program,” defined the conditions for those different approaches. One finds in them Thomas’ concern to discover, depending on who were his interlocutors, the common ground where the encounter could take place, inside or outside an area delimited by the authorities to which both parties referred: the Gospel for the heretics who accepted the New Testament, the Bible for the Jews, and reason for the Muslims and pagans in general.<sup>38</sup>

References to reason, references to the authority of the Scriptures and considerations of Christian truths are distributed in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* in accordance with this fundamental distinction. The primary truths involve the use of all possible demonstrative arguments. Such are the contents of the first three books, which are concerned with God, the creature emanating from Him and the return of all things toward Him. As for the secondary ones — those springing from the authority of the Scriptures — one should “resolve” the arguments that the infidels raised against them in the name of reason; one should attempt to make them plausible by means of “probable” arguments, while simultaneously pointing out, for the benefit of the Christians, the texts on which they are based. Whatever the difference between these two levels of presentation may have been, however, what counted in either case was the effect of the encounter with the other party on the presentation of truth: a presentation that took into account all the difficulties of the infidel in approaching the Christian faith.

---

34. Patfoort, p. 127.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 105 and 127.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

38. Cf. CG I:2 and Patfoort, p. 121.

In this respect, “Books One to Three of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* represented, centuries ahead of its time, the phase of a dialogue between Christians and infidels in which, before studying the differences, one first stresses, with joy, the points of agreement.”<sup>39</sup> As for Book Four, which dealt more precisely with the specifically Christian doctrine of the “economy” of salvation, Patfoort showed that it, too, was conceived in a spirit of dialogue. Setting forth typically Christian mysteries such as the Incarnation and the Eucharist, “Saint Thomas indulged in a general reflection in which a concern for what the infidels would think took first place.”<sup>40</sup> He sought to demonstrate the “depth of wisdom” of these mysteries, to “exclude impossibilities” and to present their “admirable reasons” in such a way that the infidels would find the Church’s doctrine neither impossible nor incongruous. In short, “the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was not directly intended for these infidels; it was written for the believers who would have to encounter them.”<sup>41</sup>

Patfoort emphasizes, like Gauthier before him,<sup>42</sup> that “it was exclusively old Christian names or Christian currents from the past” which appeared in the long series of debates in Book Four. Yet he shows, too, that the apparent anachronism or timelessness of these discussions confirms their pedagogical value for a consideration of the truth which is sensitive to the reactions of outsiders. In fact, much more than it was a storehouse of arguments for actual debates, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* “was in a sense a plan of battle, an estimate of the tactics to be used and the precautions to take.”<sup>43</sup> In this sense it may be described as polemical or missionary, provided that it is quite clear that it was primarily concerned with strengthening the believer in his faith and preparing him for the encounter. It proposed a model for the “style”<sup>44</sup> in which such an encounter could be conducted.

One is therefore now able to grasp the precise nature of Patfoort’s modification of Gauthier’s thesis. Utilizing — as Thomas did throughout the *Summa Contra Gentiles* — concepts taken from Aristotle, one could say that Patfoort made a specific differentiation of the generic definition suggested by Gauthier. The *Summa Contra Gentiles* was without a doubt a work of wisdom whose fundamental purpose was the contemplation of the truth, but it was elaborated in a climate of confrontation and encounter which gave it its very special character. One may conclude, as Patfoort did at the end of his book, that “taking everything into account and allowing for the necessary nuances,” it is possible to call it missionary in the highest and most eternal sense that this term has been given in Christianity. “In fact, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* contains several elements that positively oblige a departure not only from the scholastic framework, but also from the Christian framework.”<sup>45</sup> It is addressed to all seekers after wisdom in a spirit of goodwill.

---

39. Patfoort, p. 127.

40. Ibid., p. 112.

41. Ibid., p. 118.

42. Gauthier, pp. 76–77, and Patfoort, p. 127.

43. Patfoort, p. 118.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., p. 111.

The conclusion we have now reached is strikingly confirmed by an analysis of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* made by Guy Allard from a completely different point of view.<sup>46</sup> The similarity of the results is therefore all the more remarkable. Allard stressed the *deliberative* character of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. The originality of his approach is that he “proposes a reading of the work, complementary to the others, from the point of view of an analysis of its *form*.”<sup>47</sup> What interests him is not so much the internal analysis of the contents as the structure and style of the work. He “is attentive, rather, to the workmanship of the writing, to its laws of composition and its editorial articulation.”<sup>48</sup> “From this formal viewpoint, a concern for *what* was said is less important than *how* things were said.”<sup>49</sup>

In order to undertake an analysis of this kind, Allard referred to the canons of ancient rhetoric. Such a step seemed to him legitimate because, like Paul Zumthor, he believed that “the domination of literature in the Latin language by rhetoric was total.”<sup>50</sup> It is established historically and from literary evidence that Thomas had a very good knowledge of Cicero.<sup>51</sup> Allard therefore applied Cicero’s rhetorical rules to show that the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was constructed on the model of a deliberative discourse or, in other words, planned with an encounter with interlocutors in view.

It must be admitted that, from its own formal point of view, Allard’s argument is quite convincing. He is not above using a computer in order to estimate the frequency of occurrence of vocabulary. From this careful analysis we need to single out only two elements whose very concurrence exactly confirms our own conclusions. On the one hand, there is an insistence on the fact that the *Summa Contra Gentiles* is intended to be a work of wisdom or, more precisely, a comparative study of conceptions of wisdom as a path to happiness. On the other hand, there is an exposition of the deliberative — that is dialogical — character of a demonstration constantly sensitive to other positions.

Concerning the first point, Allard rightly observed that “the *Contra Gentiles* instructs, persuades, refutes concerning the means that it considers useful for attaining happiness and ultimate beatitude: the study of wisdom (as an architectonic science), the increase of Wisdom, the Christian and Catholic religion.”<sup>52</sup> This, indeed, was the plan that was clearly stated in the first nine chapters. In order, however, to elaborate and define his own conception of happiness and of the wisdom that leads to it, Thomas took other approaches into consideration:

---

46. Guy H. Allard, “Le ‘Contra Gentiles’ et le modèle rhétorique,” in *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* (1974), pp. 237–260.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

50. P. Zumthor, “Rhétorique et poétique latines et romanes,” in *Grundriss der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*, vol. 1 (Heidelberg, 1972), p. 75; Allard, p. 239.

51. Allard, p. 239. Cf. P.C. Vansteenkiste, “Cicerone nell’opera di S. Tommaso,” *Angelicum* 36 (1959), 343–382.

52. Allard, p. 241.

In a question as much debated as the ideal of happiness, it was inevitable that there would be a certain pluralism, and that different thinkers (Græco-Latin, Jewish and Arab philosophers) and churches (Jewish, Muslim, heretical, schismatic) would propose other avenues and other paths toward beatitude. The *Contra Gentiles* reflected all this ideological diversity and the internal tensions it revealed; not fearing to confront all these opinions, the *Contra Gentiles* constantly stressed the possibility, utility and efficacy of the means that it recommended to anyone searching for true happiness: whether the study of wisdom or an adherence to the increate and incarnate Wisdom and the faith of the Catholic Church. In this respect, the *Contra Gentiles* corresponds to the objectives and discursive rules defined by the “deliberative genre.”<sup>53</sup>

Such a purpose required a particular method, that of dialogue:

Undertaken in front of the mass of men and Christians, the argument had to keep on the level of the believable, of the conceivable; one can readily understand, therefore, that arguments of suitability, general custom (*multitudinis usus*) and the deep sentiments of the human heart were those most often used. Here we are clearly in the realm of Aristotle’s *Topics* and not of his *Analytics*.<sup>54</sup>

I would give more credit than Allard to the dialectical rigor and demonstrative value of Thomas’ arguments in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, rather than relegate it to the realm of the *Topics*. Yet that is not important from the point of view of our present discussion. What we must note in Allard’s work is that he confirms in his own way, by means of an original method, the conclusions to which Patfoort brought us. Both of them help us to add nuances to the interpretation proposed by Gauthier. Their solution of the dilemma “wisdom versus mission” is the same. Thus the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was fundamentally a work of theological wisdom; its purpose was not that of providing missionaries with a basic manual or a collection of arguments with which to convert the infidels. If it was polemical, it was on the level of a transcendental confrontation between truth and error. If it was “missionary,” it was so, so to speak, only to a secondary degree. Thomas was willing to recommend to any interlocutor, whoever that might be, what according to his reason and faith appeared to be the best path to beatitude. At the same time, however, he wished to prepare the theologian or preacher to encounter other concepts of humanity and happiness offered by other types of wisdom.

In this connection, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* provided both a pedagogy of dialogue and a minimal common base upon which the confrontation and the debate could be entered into. Starting from a basic agreement on the necessity for wisdom, Thomas turned toward other philosophical and theological systems in order to demonstrate the singularity and excellence of his own human and Christian vision. Although he did this, of course, through a refuta-

---

53. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 240–241. Aristotle’s *Analytics* seek to formulate the rules by which science should proceed; his *Topics* give instruction in how to conduct debates with an opponent. The former aims to demonstrate certain truths; the latter aims rather to win arguments by being more persuasive than one’s opponent.

tion of error, he was also concerned to reveal those elements in the positions of others which were identical with those of his own synthesis or which seemed to him to be potentially open to the truth of his faith.

May we be forgiven this long exposition. It was necessary to describe the intention, character and style of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* in order to understand the way in which Thomas treated the Jews and Judaism in this work. The conclusions we have reached concerning the infidels and particularly the Muslims find here a particular application and confirmation. Thomas undoubtedly spoke of the Jews and mentioned Jewish philosophers, but no more than in the case of the others was his intention to convert them or to provide arguments with which to do so.

## The Jews in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*

Regarding the manner and context in which the Jews appear in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, certain details are clear. First of all, Thomas undoubtedly knew of the existence of Jewish communities at the heart of the Christian world. Moreover, certain allusions in the second book show that he was aware of the affair of the condemnation of the Talmud. This had caused a great stir in Paris a few years before he had arrived there. He must have been especially interested because the members of his order had played a major part in the affair.

The facts are known.<sup>55</sup> Nicolas Donin, a converted Jew who had no doubt become a Franciscan,<sup>56</sup> had in 1238 denounced the Talmud to Pope Gregory the Ninth and had enumerated its "errors" in thirty-five articles. The University of Paris took the matter in hand, and after many debates between the doctors and rabbis, the Talmud was finally condemned by the papal legate Eudes of Chateauroux on May 15, 1248. The relevant documents were gathered in 1248 and 1255 in a collection called *Excerpta Talmudica*.

It is quite likely that when he wrote the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas had this collection in front of him. On the one hand, judging from the number of manuscripts that have come down to us, it would seem that the *Excerpta* had a fairly wide circulation.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, as the author of this collection was a Dominican, Thibault of Sézanne, subprior of the monastery of Saint Jacques de Paris and himself a converted Jew, it is most possible that Thomas was particularly interested. In fact, in the two chapters where Thomas refers to the Talmud, it may be understood that he was alluding to the passages cited by Nicolas Donin and published in the *Excerpta*.

Even if that reference to the Talmud was an exact one, however, it must be recognized that it was brief and isolated. When speaking of the Jews, Thomas did not cite the Talmud at greater length or more often than he cited and

---

55. Cf. H. Graetz, "Die Schicksale des Talmuds im Verlaufe der Geschichte," *Monatschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 34 (1885); S. Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century* (New York, 1966), pp. 339–340; I. Loeb, "La Controverse de 1240 sur le Talmud," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 1 (1880), 247–261, and 2 (1881), 248–270.

56. Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca and London, 1982), pp. 60–76, esp. p. 61, n. 19.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 64–70; Gauthier, pp. 78–79.

commented on the Koran when referring to the doctrines of Islam. We already noted on a more general level that Thomas, in writing the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, was not thinking of the conversion of the Jews of his time. As Gauthier pointed out in support of his general thesis: "His allusions to the Talmud remain an exception. Apart from these he very rarely mentioned the errors of the Jews, and even when he did, nothing suggests that he was thinking of the Jews of his time: his references were usually very general and could be applied to the Jews of all periods."<sup>58</sup> One can further confirm the timeless character of these references by the fact that Thomas specifically referred to the Jews of antiquity — the Pharisees<sup>59</sup> and Sadducees.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, where the Jews — and Muslims — were concerned, there is something else which, by comparison, can help us to characterize the purpose and contents of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. If there was a thirteenth-century work that was, and still is, associated with the polemic against the Jews, it was the *Pugio Fidei Adversus Mauros et Judaeos* written by the Dominican Raymond Martin in 1278, shortly after Thomas' death. One might say that the writer referred a great deal to the *Summa Contra Gentiles* in order to establish or reinforce his theological argument. Yet this very use of the *Contra Gentiles* confirms the "uninvolved" nature of Thomas' words: "for, if Raymond Martin wrote his *Pugio Fidei*, it was because he realized that the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was not the practical work he needed."<sup>61</sup> The intention and the interlocutors, like the tone of the discussion, were different in each case.

Nonetheless, it is true that in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Thomas mentioned Jewish philosophers who, if not contemporary, were at least not very distant in time: Rabbi Isaac (tenth century), Ibn Gabirol (eleventh century), and above all Maimonides, "Rabbi Moyses," who died at the beginning of the thirteenth century. The manner in which he quoted them, whether to refute them or to find support in their doctrines, confirms the fact that he encountered them on the level of a search for wisdom. Thus Isaac was quoted only once, but it was as an authority.<sup>62</sup> If Thomas cited Ibn Gabirol, whom he took to be a Muslim philosopher, it was on the level of philosophical discussion.<sup>63</sup>

As for Maimonides, he was treated as a special interlocutor and was sometimes present in the discussion even when his name was not explicitly mentioned.<sup>64</sup> Thomas regarded him as the representative of Jewish philosophical

---

58. Cf. H. Denifle and A. Châtelain, *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1889), p. 211, n. 12.

59. CG III:85.

60. CG II:31.

61. Cf. Gauthier, p. 99, n. 268.

62. "Cui consonat verbum Ysaac dicentis quod ratio oritur in verbo intelligentiae" — first edition of CG I:57, *Edition Léonide*, vol. XIII, 23b46.

63. Cf. CG III:69.

64. Cf. CG II:92, the refutation of his teaching about angels, and III:97, where he is cited as a source of information about Muslim theology. But sometimes he is in mind though not explicitly cited, as in I:12 and 20, II:24, and III:65 and 69. Among studies of the encounter between the teaching of Maimonides and that of Thomas, note esp. E. Gilson, "Maïmonide et la philosophie de l'exode," *Medieval Studies* 13 (1951), 223–225.

wisdom. In the most important points of Thomas' doctrine concerning God, the debate with Maimonides represented a particular example of a dialogue between lovers of wisdom, passionately searching for truth. Indeed, precisely because it was concerned with the manifestation of the truth and consequently with the refutation of error, this dialogue belongs to a climate of controversy. Thomas respected his Jewish interlocutor. Yet, with a feeling that the latter had not yet attained the fullness of the truth, he sought to draw attention to the points where his error or limitations were apparent. However, the whole debate took place on the level of searching.

This is the place to recall, with reference to the encounter with the Jewish philosophers, the formulas we met when we tried to grasp the intention of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*: "an attempt before its time at ecumenism between Christians and infidels," "the phase of a dialogue ... in which, before studying the differences, one first stresses, with joy, the points of agreement,"<sup>65</sup> or an application of the "discursive rules defined by the 'deliberative genre.'"<sup>66</sup> Such is decidedly the style and the atmosphere that have to be restored to the passages in which those particular "infidels," the Jews, appear in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. They are considered in their difference, certainly, yet as interlocutors that sometimes have to be refuted but sometimes listened to with respect for a truth that is also the truth of salvation.

## The Nature of the *Summa Theologiae*

The *Summa Theologiae* is without a doubt the work that has immortalized Thomas Aquinas. It is regarded as the symbol of his genius: the "genius of order," as described by the title of a book devoted to an exposition of his doctrine.<sup>67</sup> If, as Thomas himself used to say, *sapientis est ordinare*, then the *Summa Theologiae* through its synthetic power and internal architecture was a work of wisdom *par excellence* or, more exactly, a scientific presentation of a Christian approach to wisdom.

How do the Jews and Judaism appear in this synthesis? The answer to this question requires an opposite procedure from the one we adopted in the case of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. There the problem was to demonstrate that in spite of its appearance and the legend surrounding it, this work which seems polemical, and which a long tradition regarded as mission-oriented, was basically one of wisdom. If we now turn to the *Summa Theologiae*, the problem is to demonstrate that this monument of rationality or cathedral of Christian wisdom contains in its construction the history whose unfolding is related in the Bible, and in particular the Jewish people's place in it.

We shall see that it is precisely a mark of the genius and originality of Thomas that he succeeded in combining, in a contemplative synthesis, the history of salvation with the *ordo disciplinae*, that is, the logical order of exposition of the themes of Christian theology. The *Summa Theologiae* was un-

---

65. Cf. Patfoort, pp. 105 and 127.

66. Cf. Allard, p. 242.

67. J. Webert, *Saint Thomas d'Aquin: Le Génie de l'ordre* (Paris, 1934).

doubtedly the most complete attempt in the history of Christian doctrine to give a reasoned account of the plan whose mystery God revealed in the Bible.

In his *Introduction à l'étude de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, M.D. Chenu gave a splendid exposition of the movement of Christian reflection of which Thomas' work, and particularly the *Summa Theologiae*,<sup>68</sup> formed part. At the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was a kind of renaissance which might be described as a progressive introduction of reason into faith.

In theology, the data offered by faith to the human intelligence are obviously presented in conditions unsuitable to conceptual organization and totally recalcitrant to an adequate systematization: the Word of God, which is the text of revelation and at the same time the internal logos, possesses that unity only in the thought of God. Systems, in theology, are the very sign of the weakness of man's intelligence, as of his strength in the realm of faith. The creation of *summae*, in the thirteenth century, illustrates this great problem of transforming a sacred history into an organized science.<sup>69</sup>

It was indeed a revolution, with the opportunities and risks that all revolutions entail. The "master of scriptural interpretation" (*magister in sacra pagina*) became the "master of sacred theology" (*magister in sacra theologia*).<sup>70</sup> One of Thomas' exemplary merits was precisely that in his case the second of these titles never eclipsed the first, and that he met the requirements of both of them. The *sacra pagina* always remained fully present in the midst of the most rigorous, most abstract processes of his theological labors. The systematic exposition of Christian wisdom was never cut off, in his work, from the Word that was its living source.

In Thomas' case, however, this assertion had two different implications. On the one hand, it meant that rationality was used in the service of a spiritual understanding of the Scriptures. This, in the thirteenth century, was undoubtedly the aim of all genuine theologians. In the formulation of Hugh of Saint Victor, "The theology professor's chair is the sacred Scripture" (*Cathedra doctoris sacra Scriptura est*).<sup>71</sup> As Chenu pointed out, at this turning-point of the Middle Ages when meditation on the Word passed from monastery to the urban school and then to the university, and from the scriptorium of the chapter-house to the lecture-room, the *sacra doctrina* became the new form of *lectio divina*.<sup>72</sup>

In this respect, the *Summa Theologiae* is the most perfect example of a contemplation that found fulfillment in expressing itself in a rational manner. Yet that was not all. In Thomas' case, the reference to the Scriptures also implied a vivid awareness of the reality of the history related by the Word, or in which it reverberated. This success of the intelligence in explicating the faith is best expressed if we formulate it in terms of the remarkably concentrated Latin

---

68. Chenu, *Introduction* (see note 4 above), esp. ch. 9, pp. 255–276.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 207–209 and 258–264.

71. Hugh of Saint Victor, *Miscellanea* I:75 (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 177, 510).

72. Cf. Chenu, *Introduction*, pp. 220–221 and 213–216.



terminology of the period. The purpose of theological knowledge, as demonstrated in the *Summa Theologiae*, was to capture the spiritual significance of the mysteries revealed in the *sacra pagina* and in the *realia* of *historia scholastica* in accordance with the rationality of an *ordo disciplinae*.<sup>73</sup>

It is in this perspective that one must understand what was said of Jews and Judaism in the *Summa Theologiae*. In this respect, as in many others, the synthesis arrived at by Thomas was profoundly original. In order to appreciate its originality and depth, it is necessary to examine its component parts. For this purpose it will be sufficient to reexamine, one by one, the terms that we have just cited: 1) *sacra pagina*, 2) *historia scholastica* and 3) *ordo disciplinae*. They refer to different currents of a development of which Thomas was part, and which he succeeded in unifying in his synthesis. Chenu demonstrated their providential convergence in this golden age of Christian thought.<sup>74</sup> The *Summa Theologiae* was situated at their confluence.

## **Sacra Pagina**

Contrary to what a centuries-old habit of the Schools might cause us to think, Thomas never taught the *Summa Theologiae*. Thus the book that for generations of clerics and students of theology was the basic text of their curriculum was not the product of courses given by Thomas. It was an introductory text for beginners.

This significant fact will help us to understand the place of Scripture in Thomas' work in general and the *Summa Theologiae* in particular. Master Thomas' primary task, like that of all the masters of theology of his time, was to provide a commentary on the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>75</sup> In this, he could have applied to his own work Hugh of Saint Victor's principle, mentioned earlier: "The theology professor's chair is the sacred Scripture."<sup>76</sup>

The young disciple of Albertus Magnus, who arrived in Paris to teach in 1252, began his career as a theologian as a *cursor* or *biblicus ordinarius*, reading *cursorie* or *textualiter* — *biblice*, as they said in Paris — the sacred text as a whole. It was a biblical propedeutics that many scholars of today might envy their brothers of the Middle Ages! Throughout Thomas' university career, commentary on the Scriptures was for him, as for all the masters, the one basic, permanent and regularly recurring component of his theological teaching.<sup>77</sup> The rhythm and the level of this teaching from the text certainly differed, in accordance with place and circumstance, in Paris, Naples and Rome. Given daily in one place, twice-weekly in another, it is difficult for us to know the variety of programs. What is certain and most important, however, is that

---

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 258–264.

74. Such is, in effect, the guiding intuition that is developed by Chenu in his *Introduction* and in his other major work, *La Théologie au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1957), as well as his little volume in the series "Maîtres spirituels," *Saint Thomas d'Aquin et la théologie* (Paris, 1959).

75. Chenu, *Introduction*, pp. 207 ff.

76. Cf. note 71 above.

77. Chenu, *Introduction*, p. 208.

this reading of the Scriptures and commentary on them was the basis of all teaching.

Thus Thomas' written work in *sacra pagina* was spread throughout his whole career. We are far from possessing all the texts. Yet what has come down to us, whether texts written by him (*expositiones*) or accounts written by others (*lecturae*), shows that he carefully covered the books that were currently taught: Genesis, the Prophets (Isaiah and Jeremiah), the Psalms, the Song of Songs and the Book of Job in the Old Testament, and the Gospels of Matthew and John and the Epistles of Paul in the New. In reading these commentaries, be they *expositiones* or *lecturae*, one is immediately aware that it is in this task that Thomas was conscious of best exercising his function as a theologian. He was both traditional and innovative in this function.

It should be pointed out that in this task Thomas inherited the benefits of a revival that was already in progress. On the one hand, especially within the Dominican order to which he belonged, there already existed an elaborate pedagogical program. On the other, there was available a certain store of scholarship to which the members of his monastery, the celebrated Saint Jacques de Paris, had already contributed substantially. In this monastery, during the two decades before the arrival of the young Thomas in Paris, there had been intelligent and persistent teamwork in the sphere of biblical studies. It took place under the direction of Hugh of Saint Cher, who was first regent of the college (1230–1235), then provincial and finally cardinal (1244).<sup>78</sup>

This undertaking corresponded to an urgent need, in both the doctrinal and pastoral spheres, felt by the Dominican friars of the period as well as by the teachers of the university. It was extremely important for promoting possibly a new view of the Bible and providing the necessary tools. First, one had to make available a text of the sacred books which could serve as the basis for a truly scientific study; this was the *Correctoria*. Then one had to compile a *verbal* concordance for the interpretation and organic use of texts, with their contexts and parallel references; this was the *Concordantiae Sancti Jacobi*, which Albertus Magnus was one of the first to use when he was professor in Paris. Thus, when he arrived at Saint Jacques, Thomas had the benefit of new resources: not only a fund of texts and of working tools, but above all the spiritual climate of an open and intense intellectual life within a scholarly community motivated by a single purpose.

Consequently, Thomas' theological reflection developed in the context of a permanent preoccupation with *sacra pagina*. In the many different aspects of his task — as the commentator on the *Sentences*, the polemicist of *Disputed Questions*, the giver of *Responsaria* and the author of *Summa Theologiae* — the basis of his work was the reference to the Word of God. The continuous study of Scripture was the soil from which his entire theological production, even at its most systematic and elaborate, derived both its sap and its substance.

Two facts among others confirm the permanence of this reference to the Bible as a precondition of theological reflection. The first is of a historical

---

78. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

nature, particularly striking where the *Summa Theologiae* is concerned. In a recent article on the plan and context of the *Summa Theologiae*,<sup>79</sup> L.E. Boyle showed that Thomas wrote some of his most remarkable biblical commentaries — the *Postilla* on Jeremiah, that on Lamentations and, above all, his *Exposition on Job* — precisely at the period when he was working at Orvieto as theologian to the papal court. Moreover, as Boyle pointed out, Thomas was then in the midst of reflecting on the reforms to be made in the theological *cursus* (course) of the Order of Saint Dominic, just before he was given responsibility for creating a pedagogical model in a *studium* under his control in the monastery of Saint Sabina in Rome.<sup>80</sup>

We must also remember that precisely in this period, at the request of Pope Urban IV, Thomas began to compose the *Catena Aurea*, a sequence of patristic texts skillfully arranged to form a continuous commentary which he himself called an *expositio continua*. The very style of the work, intended to provide the basis for a dialogue with the Greeks, reveals the interpenetration of *sacra pagina* and theological reflection in the elaboration of the *sacra doctrina*.<sup>81</sup>

There is also another fact, still more convincing from our viewpoint as it concerns the contents of the *Summa Theologiae* itself. This work contained in effect a biblical theology, immediately based on the text of Scripture and directly developed in a commentary. In it, and indeed in every part of it, there are whole sections of biblical material, of sacred history, elaborated within the very movement of the systematic reflection.

Apart from the matters connected with the text of the Synoptic Gospels on the beatitudes or the writings of the Apostle Paul on the fruits of the Spirit or his list of charismas, there are above all the three large groups of questions that are purely and simply commentaries on *sacra pagina*: Genesis and the work of the six days in the treatise on the Old Law (Part 1, qu. 67–74), the legislative texts in the treatise on the Old Law (Section 1 of Part 2, qu. 98–106), and the life and mysteries of Christ in the extension of the treatise on the Incarnation (Part 3, qu. 27–59). Thomas did not write separate commentaries on Genesis, Leviticus or Deuteronomy. They exist, however, even if they do not figure on the list of his exegetical works. They are to be found in the *Summa Theologiae*.

Thus the *Summa Theologiae* included in its structure and pedagogy a biblical theology that has been practically neglected by most commentators and writers of Thomist manuals. To be sure, it contained many elements that have been superseded. The progress of historical exegesis and the development of methods have introduced an autonomy in areas of scholarship that were formerly homogeneous, and a separation between them. Yet the principle remains: one cannot overlook the importance and significance of the Bible in the structure of the *Summa Theologiae* without upsetting the balance of the synthesis. One benefit of the reference to the Scriptures is that events and

---

79. Leonard E. Boyle, *The Setting of the Summa Theologiae of Saint Thomas* (Etienne Gilson Series 5; Toronto, 1982), pp. 1–30.

80. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–10.

81. Cf. Chenu, *Introduction*, p. 212.

*realia* of the history of salvation are woven into the web of theological knowledge. The reference to the sacred text really implies a reference to sacred history.

## **Historia Scholastica**

If we have given this section of our essay the same title as the celebrated work by Peter Comestor,<sup>82</sup> it is not because Thomas particularly used that work or commented on it. It would even seem that he, for his part, preferred to teach the text of the Bible directly rather than to refer to an intermediary, whatever may have been the prestige of a work widely disseminated in the Middle Ages. The reason for our choice is that this expression, *historia scholastica*, well describes the attention that the Schools gave to the historical dimension of the Bible from the second half of the twelfth century onwards.

Comestor's aim was to present Scripture as a history and not as a pretext for disordered reflections or speculative expositions. In view of the abundance and increasing proliferation of the commentaries that surrounded — and encumbered — the sacred text itself, he wished to rediscover the “truth of history” (*veritas historiae*). “Leaving to the more competent the deep sea of mysteries” (*pelagus mysteriorum peritioribus relinquens*), he followed “the little stream of history” (*rivulum historicum*), which led from Moses' cosmography to the ascension of Christ.<sup>83</sup>

Clearly, this was not history in our sense of “historical method” or “historical consciousness.” As Chenu noted with some humor, “Saint Jerome did not dethrone Saint Augustine, even in the case of a disciple of Andrew of Saint Victor.”<sup>84</sup> The importance of Comestor's work, however, was that it presented the Bible according to a historical view of humanity's destiny. Such was his influence that there would come about a kind of pedagogical split in theological studies, as recorded in the official programs. As against Lombard's *Sentences*, which represented the definite introduction of a systematic organization and dialectical elaboration of the revealed datum, Comestor's *Historia* was a conscious reevaluation of sacred history. It was cited as one of the basic texts, together with the Bible and the *Sentences*. Peter Comestor became the *Magister Historiarum*, just as Peter Lombard was the *Magister Sententiarum*.

It has been asked whether the use of Comestor's history, decreed by the rules of certain universities and the program of the Order of Saint Dominic,<sup>85</sup> was not a sign of decadence in the reading of the biblical text. One must answer in the affirmative, if the success of the *Historia* meant that it had taken the place of *expositiones* of the Scriptures. We have seen that Thomas was

---

82. On the place and the significance of the work of Peter Comestor, the best introduction remains Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1982), ch. 5.

83. Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica*, Prologue.

84. Chenu, p. 204.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 205. Boyle, p. 2, for his part, notes the importance given to the *Historia Scholastica* in the study program of the Dominican Order, while emphasizing that Thomas seems to have preferred direct commentary on the Bible.

conscious of that risk.<sup>86</sup> But one must answer negatively, if the interest in the *Historia* was due to its having provided a better understanding of the history of salvation.

The finest example at that period of a theological synthesis elaborated according to this historical perspective was to be found in the work of Hugh of Saint Victor. His *Didascalicon* insisted on the importance of *historia* in relation to the other disciplines used by the theologian: *logica*, *dialectica* and *grammatica*. *Historia* meant the "economy," the dispensation of religious realities that were not organized according to a system of the Spirit but through the unfolding of time (*processus saeculi*), recorded in a succession of events presented in a sequence of narration (*series narrationis*). Hugh's *Didascalicon* introduced an "awareness of the Christian datum as a series of events, and thus a perception of human and Christian values in history."<sup>87</sup>

All of Hugh's work displayed a similar approach, beginning with his spiritual writings,<sup>88</sup> but it was most evident in the very construction of his masterwork, *De Sacramentis*. It was according to historical order that the work was divided into books and chapters: "The First Book takes the sequence of narration from the beginning of the world up to the Incarnation of the Word; the Second Book proceeds from the Incarnation of the Word up to the end and consummation of all things in order."<sup>89</sup> As Chenu said: "The economy of salvation, totally centered on the Incarnation, was the very warp and weft of the work, *narrationis series*: its 'construction' is pursued inside the 'sacred history'."<sup>90</sup>

## **Ordo Disciplinae**

One is especially struck by the vigor of Hugh of Saint Victor's synthesis which contrasts with other theological enterprises that appeared at the same period, ones characterized by a common tendency to abandon the time-factor. An example was the Platonism of William of Conches and of the school of Chartres, seeking in Plato's *Timaeus* the explanation of the order of the forms of nature. Another was Abelard's dialectics and his pedagogical exposition of sacred doctrine under the headings of *fides*, *caritas* and *sacramentum*. A third was the nominalist theory of the non-temporal truth of the assertions of Scripture, in Bernard of Chartres. All these theological elaborations had in common the characteristic that they abandoned historical order and tried to reduce all the facts of the economy of salvation to rational categories.

In his great book on theology in the twelfth century,<sup>91</sup> Chenu convincingly demonstrated that each of these phenomena represented a renaissance of Christian thought in the making. They were the signs of health of a Christian humanism discovering or rediscovering the means with which to give an intel-

---

86. Boyle, p. 5.

87. Chenu, *La Théologie*, pp. 65–66.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 67; also Chenu's *Introduction*, p. 124.

89. Prologue to *De Sacramentis* (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 176, 173).

90. Chenu, *Introduction*, p. 259.

91. Chenu, *La Théologie*, pp. 11–15, 19–20, 233–240, 343–350.

ligible account of its faith, logic and grammar, history and symbolism. He claimed, however, that between these different expressions of an authentic renaissance, a kind of diffraction was also operative. The resulting opposition was not only between methods but between modes of thought. Naturalistic idealism and dialectical reason competed with the concrete sense of a history in which human and divine freedom counted for more than the determinisms of nature.

Was it possible to overcome such a profound antagonism and to express the reality of sacred history within the rational framework of an *ordo disciplinae*? One of the great merits of Thomas in the *Summa Theologiae* was undoubtedly his success in combining the requirements of those two antagonistic tendencies. It was a work of wisdom in which God's initiatives in the history of salvation found their place with their unforeseeable, gratuitous and, in a word, contingent character.

It must be recognized that this intention is not apparent at first sight in Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*. The literary genre itself did not seem to imply it. When the theologians of the thirteenth century began to compile *summae*, they did so as professional scholastic teachers and had three aims: to provide a concise exposition of the doctrine as a whole; to organize its subject-matter systematically in order to counteract its fragmentation in commentaries and glosses; and to deal with its difficulty in a manner suitable for students.

Thomas himself clearly stated these aims in the prologue to the *Summa Theologiae*. By this standard, his work was undoubtedly the greatest achievement in this genre. It formed part of a development, beginning with Abelard and Peter Lombard at the end of the twelfth century, in which expositions of the contents of the faith were based on architectonic principles drawn from the structures of the Spirit. What was new in Thomas' *summa*, however, was precisely that his enterprise of conceptualization and systematization incorporated in its structure a "history of the temporal dispensation of divine providence" (*historia dispensationis divinae providentiae*).<sup>92</sup> The latter was Hugh of Saint Victor's principle of exposition. Thomas was without a doubt the first to have succeeded in this undertaking.

The achievement was all the more remarkable in that the difficulty was far greater for Thomas than for his predecessors of the twelfth century. In the time since Abelard and Lombard, the notion of science had been greatly developed through the introduction of Aristotle's works on physics and metaphysics into the schools of the West. Henceforth, the problem was posed in a more stringent manner: Was the sacred doctrine a science, in the sense of organic and demonstrative knowledge that could explain the order of natures? Could the study of the economy of salvation, the doctrinal interpretation of the biblical narrative in which it is found, assume the form and structure of a science without disfiguring sacred history? How, without changing their original economy, could the elements of revelation be arranged according to a speculative order that would be truly intelligible?<sup>93</sup> This was the challenge that Thomas took up, and whose result was the *Summa Theologiae*.

---

92. Augustin, *De Vera Religione*, ch. 7 (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 34, 128).

93. Chenu, *Introduction*, pp. 259–260.

That the *Summa Theologiae* was an introduction to theology conceived as a work of wisdom was made clear by Thomas in the first “question” of his work, which presented the methodology of this particular science.<sup>94</sup> The characteristic of this knowledge was that its subject was God in His reality, and everything else — whether the works of God *ad extra*, creation and re-creation, or human actions in search of God — was dealt with *sub ratione Dei*.

It is interesting, moreover, that there is a historical confirmation of Thomas’ intention at the time when he decided to write the *Summa Theologiae*. It appears that he insisted strongly on that specifically contemplative and theological aspect of theological science in reaction against certain pastoral and practical tendencies of the Dominican brethren, including respectable authorities such as Humbert of Romans and Raymond of Peñafort. They had wished to limit the scope of theological studies to the training of future confessors. As L.E. Boyle has demonstrated, Thomas’ intention was precisely to restore the equilibrium of the Dominican program of studies by providing the missing dimension of wisdom.<sup>95</sup> It was in this spirit that he wrote the First Part of the *Summa Theologiae* with the aim of counter-balancing the disproportionate, if not exclusive, importance given to practical morals, of filling the doctrinal void in the studies of the brethren, and of implanting moral theology in an authentic science of God.<sup>96</sup>

One should remember that precisely at this period Thomas was given the responsibility of creating a *studium* at the monastery of Saint Sabina in Rome, which on account of its remarkable and exemplary character, Boyle did not hesitate to describe as “personal.”<sup>97</sup> It may be concluded that Thomas had perceived in an urgent and concrete manner the need to focus theological studies on God, the Creation and the Trinity. He did not regard the moral aspect of theology as truly theological unless it was elaborated *sub ratione Dei*.

We should take note of this factual confirmation of the intention that governed the writing of the *Summa Theologiae*. What held for morality, moreover, held even more so for sacred history and the economy of salvation. The true subject of theology was not properly or primarily the series of divine initiatives whereby humankind received faith and grace through Christ. The Incarnation itself found its ultimate cause in the munificence of the divine goodness,<sup>98</sup> and it was through the wisdom of God that this supernatural, historical and contingent intervention received its supreme intelligibility.

A philosophical schema taken from the Neo-Platonic tradition served as the framework and instrument of this wisdom-inspired view of the history of salvation. It was the schema of procession and return, *exitus* and *reditus*.<sup>99</sup> Here Thomas’ genius shows in all its originality. He combined in a unique manner the ontological and cosmic representation that, through Denys, had

---

94. *Summa Theologiae* (henceforth: ST) Ia, qu. 1, a. 6.

95. Boyle, pp. 7 and 11.

96. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

98. ST IIIa, qu. 1.

99. Chenu, *Introduction*, p. 269.

passed from Plotinus to the Christian tradition, with the requirements of the Aristotelian scientific ideal.

What is still more remarkable, and more immediately relevant to our purpose, he succeeded in incorporating the exposition of a sacred history within a system that, in its original inspiration, excluded any history. A metaphysical conception of the universe, from the One as beginning to the One as end, had dominated Christian attempts to give a rational account of the Creation, and of the vocation of humankind in its encounter with God. If the Plotinian vision was to be incorporated into Christianity, it was necessary, of course, to divest it of its theory of emanations and to rid it of its cosmic determinism and idealist dialectics.

Already in the ninth century, the *De Divisione Naturae* of Scotus Erigena had made a brilliant attempt to apply the grandiose rhythm of the procession and return to the mystery of the Creation and the history of salvation. But if the attempt was worthy, it was as yet awkwardly expressed, and it was considered dangerous on account of its ample ambiguities.<sup>100</sup> Thomas took up the project of Scotus afresh on the basis of a stricter metaphysics, a more sharply-defined theology of sin, nature and grace, and an epistemology more sensitive to shades of differences between reason and faith. The *Summa Theologiae* was constructed on this basic rhythm of emanation and conversion, but Thomas introduced organically into its movement the initiatives of the divine liberty. The history of salvation unfolded from the Creation to beatitude, between the free action of God as an efficient cause and the beatifying action of God as a final cause.

Within the broad sweep of this movement, each part of the *Summa Theologiae* appears, *sub ratione Dei*, to be illuminated by the intelligibility of a vision of wisdom. Having contemplated God with the intention of stating His transcendence, Thomas reflected, in the First Part, on the oneness of the act of Creation and on the order of natures that God brought into being. As we have already seen, this metaphysical exposition of the Creation and of the hierarchy of the degrees of being was so little detached from the *sacra pagina* that it included a commentary on the six days of Creation.<sup>101</sup> This presentation of the order of the universe, in terms of its procession and the place in it occupied by human beings in accordance with their own nature, introduces the movement of return toward the end in which human beings find their own beatitude. Thomas methodically examined the character and circumstances of the acts whereby human beings accomplish their vocation and progressively raise themselves toward beatitude. The whole organization of human passions and virtues, whose elements Thomas found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, was thus presented in the perspective of the return to God.

At first sight, it might seem that this presentation of the procession and return owed more to purely philosophical considerations than to a specifically Christian outlook. In fact, the return to God through Christ, or in other words

---

100. Cf. M. Cappuyns, *Jean Scot Erigène* (Louvain, 1933), p. 302; also P. Vignaux, *La Pensée au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1938), p. 18.

101. ST Ia, qu. 67-74.



the revealed economy of the history of salvation, is the theme of the Third Part. There it is argued that the Incarnation, with the sacramental system that imparts its efficacy, was the means provided by God in history for attaining the felicity of salvation.

Does that mean that one has to wait for the Third Part in order to discover the initiative of God in the redemptive economy through Christ? We know that this is one of the most common complaints that certain theologians and writers on spiritual subjects have made about the plan of the *Summa Theologiae*. It might seem, indeed, that the theology of the work has been entirely constructed, from *exitus* to *reditus*, by the end of the Second Part. Chenu summed up these reservations well:

The redemptive incarnation has the effect of being an added section, and the real history of salvation superimposes itself like an unforeseeable contingency on an abstract metaphysics of God, grace and the virtues. Humanity does not at first appear as the mystical body of Christ, but as a piece of cosmology.<sup>102</sup>

Yet a careful reading of the *Summa Theologiae*, in accordance with the dynamism of its total structure, will restore to each part the movement of the whole. It will let us find in the Second Part the presence of the economy of salvation and the reference to a history that it implies. This is extremely important in regard to the place of the Jewish people and the Torah in the plan of God.

After having analyzed, at the beginning of the First Section of the Second Part, the character and circumstances of human action, Thomas suddenly considers, with a realism that he derived both from human experience and from revelation, the failure constituted by sin. This is his opportunity to broach the subject of original sin<sup>103</sup> — his first reference to the Bible and to history. Then, having analyzed the reasons for the failure, he examines the means by which God came to the assistance of human beings, beyond their natural resources. That help and the remedy for this catastrophic situation of the human-being-as-sinner come in the form of a free gift from above.<sup>104</sup> Thomas now considers, following the development to be found in biblical history, the succession of divine initiatives: the Old Law, the New Law, grace.<sup>105</sup>

In the treatise on grace, to be sure, nothing is yet said about a specifically *Christian* grace. One has to wait for the Third Part in order to learn of its source in the mystery of redemption, and its modalities in the treatise on the sacraments. What has to be recognized, nevertheless, is that the mystery of salvation is already present in those treatises on the Law and grace because of the

---

102. Chenu, *Introduction*, p. 269.

103. ST Ia-IIae, qu. 81–83. Here and in ST IIa-IIae, qu. 163–165, Thomas discusses original sin considered in itself, having dealt with the primitive human state, as it issued from the hands of the Creator, in ST Ia, qu. 94–102.

104. ST Ia-IIae, qu. 90, prologue: “Principium autem exterius movens ad bonum est Deus, qui et nos instruit per legem, et iuvat per gratiam.”

105. The *ordo disciplinae* adequately expresses the *historical* progression of the gift of God, as this progression appears in revelation, and helps us to perceive the growing *interiorization* of this “exterior” assistance.

dynamism of which they were part: that of the gift of the redeeming God. This gift is analyzed in its very structure in reference to biblical history, where it was revealed in action. Thus the history of salvation transformed from within an ethics inspired by Aristotle!

The treatises on the Old Law and New Law found their intelligibility in this perspective of wisdom open to history, the *ordo disciplinae* taking upon itself a *historia sacra*. Considered within the vast movement of the procession and return of the whole creation, and especially humanity, toward God who is its end, the election of the Jewish people and the gift of the Old Law that it received appear in the light of faith *sub ratione Dei*. It was in this perspective that Thomas examined the singular vocation of the Jewish people in its historical reality and its prophetic significance.

If, then, one wishes to discover Thomas' vision of Jews and Judaism, over and above and in spite of the reactions that he shared with the society of his period, one must carefully examine what he said about the subject in a few questions of the First Section of the Second Part of the *Summa Theologiae*. They are the questions where, following the *sacra pagina* closely and recalling the history of salvation, he considered the Jewish reality, the *realia* of the Jewish people, in accordance with the *ordo disciplinae* of a perspective of wisdom.

This vision of wisdom casts its regard upon the history of salvation, based on a reading of the Scriptures and organized in a theological synthesis. Consequently, it has to be considered on three levels, whose harmonic correspondence one can easily discern. First, one should examine the role and significance ascribed by Thomas to the Old Law in respect of the New Law in the economy of the plan of God. Since such a doctrine is based on the reading of the Bible, one should consider, second, the theory of the sense of Scripture as it is enunciated and put to work by Thomas. Third, one should study the manner in which he elaborated and unified the relationship between the old and new dispensations in his theology of the sacraments.

The importance of Thomas' discussion in the passage just mentioned has been correctly noticed by others.<sup>106</sup> Consequently, it need not be presented at length in the present study, whose aim was rather to define the broader context of Thomas' mentions of Judaism and the Jewish people.

## **Immanuel 24/25**

---

106. Cf. Hans Liebeschütz, "Judaism and Jewry in the Social Doctrine of Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 8 (1962), 57-82; Willehad Paul Eckert, "Thomas von Aquino — Seine Stellung zu Juden und zum Judentum," *Freiburger Rundbrief* 20/73-76 (1968), 30-38, esp. pp. 33-34.