Gilson and Chenu: The Structure of the *Summa* and the Shape of Dominican Life

Francesca Aran Murphy

An innovative interpretation of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* is more likely to get a man into hot water than a novel reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Thomas' writings were drawn into ideological service in the late 19th century, when a group of Italian Jesuits created a philosophy they called 'Thomism.' They used this neo-Thomism as a platform from which to criticise the subjectivism of 'modern' philosophy.[1] The philosopher Thomas was taken to have used the natural philosophy of Aristotle to biff the Gentiles with, just as the neo-Thomists were doing. With the condemnation of writers like Alfred Loisy, in 1908, 'Thomism' was put to work against modernism. Loisy was excommunicated for subjectivism, historicism and fideism. The agenda in early 20th century Thomism was to prevent fideism, Christianity without rational credibility. Thomas' thought was described as having two separate halves, philosophy and theology. From 1906, the Louvain historian Maurice de Wulf began writing a history of 'scholastic thought.' De Wulf's 'scholastic synthesis' combined all of the minds of the mediaevals into a collective intellect, which thought in a purely reasonable way. In short, one reason why it was possible for Thomism to become an 'authoritarian weapon against modernism'[2] was that the historical study of Saint Thomas was in its nascent stage.

It was men like Étienne Gilson and Marie Dominique Chenu who created the scientific study of mediaeval texts, in the first half of the twentieth century. The letters between them reflect minds which have medieval texts running through them like ticker tape. Gilson wrote his first book on Thomas in 1914 and claimed that the phobia of a contamination of reason by faith felt by some of his interpreters was

[1] The most prolonged and detailed description of the history of 19th and 20th century Neo-Thomism is Georges Van Riet, *Thomistic Epistemology: Studies Concerning the Problem of Cognition in the Contemporary Thomistic School*, 2 vols. translated by Gabriel Franks, Donald G. McCarthy and George E Hertrich (French 1946; English, St. Louis: B. Herder Books, 1963–1964).

[2] Marie-Dominique Chenu, 'L'interprète de Saint Thomas d'Aquin,' in *Étienne Gilson et nous: la philosophie et son histoire* ed., Monique Couratier (Paris: J. Vrin, 1980), p. 44.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

not experienced by Thomas himself.[3] Chenu would likewise claim that 'This disciple of Aristotle was first of all a son of Saint Dominic.'[4]

As a professor in the Dominican Studium of Le Saulchoir, Chenu had a second case to argue: what sort of initiation to Dominican life should novices have? Chenu's little book, *Le Saulchoir: Une école de théologie* claimed the *Summa* should be taught in a way which enabled people to share in Thomas' spirituality. The book was put on the Index, in 1942. On hearing the news, Gilson told his friend, 'Instead of correcting the evils and faults which the Reformers rightly noted, one can espouse their errors (Jansenism) or justify the faults. It is against this sclerotic notion of 'theology' that you protest with reason and force.'[5] The maltreatment of his clerical friends propelled Gilson into ever more extravagant historical finds, such as that Thomas and Aristotle had said that no one should study metaphysics before the age of fifty; Gilson did concede that 'It could be that young people today are more intelligent than they were in the 13th century'.[6]

Gilson and Chenu painted a portrait of Saint Thomas as a Christian Doctor whose thinking is shaped by his theology.[7] The story of this portrait begins with their apprenticeship in the art of medieval historiography. Gilson's family were cloth merchants. His father cut cloth and his mother was a fine seamstress: Gilson grew up watching deft hands making *things*. He felt he was showing symptoms of the 'malady of *chosisme*' by the time he was fifteen, in 1901. 'Chosisme' is 'thingism,' an addiction to facts.[8] In his last year at the Lycée Henri IV, Gilson attended the Sorbonne lectures of the reductionist sociologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. He spent his national service years devouring Lévy-Bruhl's *Ethics and Moral Science*, a book which argues that social facts produce morals. At the Sorbonne, between 1903 and 1905, Henri Bergson taught his students what philosophy is, by practical example.

[3] Étienne Gilson, *Introduction au système de S. Thomas D'Aquin* (Strasbourg: A Vix, 1919), p. 24. Gilson's first book on Aquinas was delivered as lectures in the University of Lille, in 1913; half of them had been published in the *Revue des cours et conférences*, in 1914, before the Great War put an end to such academic ventures. After the war, the whole text was published at Strasbourg, where Gilson was then teaching.

[4] Marie-Dominique Chenu OP, *Aquinas and his Role in Theology*, trans. Paul Philibert OP (French 1959, *Thomas d'Aquin et la théologie*, Paris: Seuil, Maîtres Spirituels, English, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), p. 45.

[5] Gilson to Marie-Dominique Chenu, 28 February 1942, in the Saulchoir archives, Saint-Jacques, Paris. I have just completed editing a selection of the Gilson/Chenu letters, and hope to see them published in the *Revue Thomiste* in the next year.

[6] Étienne Gilson, 'Note sur un texte de S. Thomas,' *Revue Thomiste* vol. 54 (1954): 148–152; reprint *Autour de saint Thomas*, ed. Jean-Francois Courtine (Paris: J. Vrin, 1983), 35–40, p. 39.

[7] Étienne Gilson, *Le thomisme: introduction au système de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Third edition, revised and augmented. Paris: J. Vrin, 1927), p. 39.

[8] Étienne Gilson, *Le philosophe et la théologie* (Paris: Librarie Arthème Fayard, 1960), p. 23.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Chenu's parents were of the Republican breed of *instituteurs*, so perhaps he inherited his evangelical teaching gene from them. Chenu visited Le Saulchoir for a friend's 'clothing' in 1913, loved the liturgy, and stayed.[9] The Dominican Studium had been shuffled to Belgium when the Religious orders were expelled from France, in 1904. Its Regent, Père Ambrose Gardeil turned it into a 'medieval research laboratory,' making novices do their own experiments on the texts.[10] Gardeil's theology was spelled out in *Le Donné révélé et la théologie*, which Chenu called 'the breviary of the Saulchoir theological method'.[11] When *Le Donné révélé* was published, in 1909, one usually stressed that theology is founded in dogmatic formulae. Gardeil shifted the weight away from *propositions*, arguing that theology works on revealed *data*, the *givens* of revelation. Gilson and Chenu learned a similar lesson from their teachers. Lévy-Bruhl argued that it is not ethical theories but social life which makes for morality, and Gardeil centred theology not on verbal formulations but on things *given*.

Round 1904, Gilson glanced into Sebastien Reinstadler's *Elementa philosophiae scholasticae*. Gilson felt the author could have just called himself an Aristotelian, but that would have stuck him with polytheism and no life after death: 'to avoid this inconvenience,' Reinstadler preferred 'to teach the body of Aristotle's philosophy, covered with Christian conclusions.'[12] The 'scholastic philosophy' struck the Sorbonne student not as *philosophy* but as a list of conclusions, unplugged from the thought processes which created them. Between 1914 and 1920, Chenu was taught scholastic philosophy in Rome, by Cardinal Billot, the mind behind the 'twenty four theses.' The 'theses' were two dozen Thomistic philosophical truths: the Holy Office made acceptance of the list a requirement for gaining a doctorate in theology.

In 1903, the Dominican Eduard Hugon published a teaching manual. The *Cursus philosophiae thomisticae* begins with philosophy of nature, taxies on from there to metaphysics, ethics, and finally takes lift off for God, or 'theodicy,' in volume six. Hugon taught Thomism like this because he considered it 'the natural order,' one in which the 'concrete and sensible' is known before the 'abstract and invisible.'[13] Others, like Joseph Gredt, in his *Elementa philosophiae*

[9] Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Jacques Duquesne interroge le père Chenu: Un théologien en liberté* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1975), p. 27.

[10] Ibid., p. 44.

[11] Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Une école de théologie: le Saulchoir* (1937; reprint, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo. Paris: éditions du Cerf, 1985), p. 119.

[12] Gilson, *Le philosophe et la théologie*, pp. 54.

[13] Géry Prouvost, 'Les relations entre philosophie et théologie chez E. Gilson et les thomistes contemporains.' *Revue Thomiste* vol. 94. No. 3 (July-September 1994): 413–430 (418).

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

aristotelico- thomisticae started with *logic*, and made logic the schema for laying Thomas out.

Gredt drew his pedagogical practice from the 19th century Thomist, Gaetano Sanseverino. Sanseverino used a set of logical axioms as the building blocks for his 'Thomist philosophy.' He refines Thomism into a theory, in which Thomas is made to propose that, 'A is A, from which results the second [principle], A is not not-A'[14] When Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange OP (1877–1964) launched an attack on Bergson's philosophy in 1909, he fired his rockets from the principle of non-contradiction.[15] Garrigou paraphrased Thomas' speech into the language of logic. He was unaware of the problems of translation. To enter Garrigou's world is not to make the imaginative step back into the Middle Ages, but to beam up into a perfect, possible world, in which syllogisms run on unhindered by contact with facts. Garrigou is said to have remarked that, 'facts are for cretins.'[16] Chenu records another of his doctoral supervisor's flights of fancy: 'After all,' Garrigou mused, 'the Incarnation is just a fact.' Chenu remarks, 'The Incarnation was an obstacle to him, because one cannot metaphysically deduce it beginning from God.[17]

Gilson's 1914 book on Aquinas called forth an objection from a Toulouse Dominican: Gilson wrote about '*the* philosophy' of Aquinas, as if it were unique to him; whereas in fact, all the scholastics shared the same, Aristotelian philosophy. Gilson attributed this misconception to the Neo-Thomists' projecting their practice of unwiring philosophy from theology onto the mediaevals. But if one compared Thomas's *theology* to Bonaventure's, one might find that different theological standpoints had created different philosophies.[18] So Gilson next wrote a book on Bonaventure. It describes Bonaventure's philosophy as an expression of Franciscan spirituality.[19]

[14] Étienne Gilson quotes Sanseverino saying this in 'Les principes et les causes,' *Revue Thomiste* vol. 52 (1952): 39–63; revised version published as Chapter II of the posthumous *Constantes philosophiques de l'être*, 53–84, p. 59.

[15] For a general statement, see Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature. A Thomistic Solution of Certain Agnostic Antinomies*, translated from the fifth French edition by Dom Bede Rose, O.S.B., (French, 1914; English, St. Louis, Mo.: B. Herder, 1939), 117–118 and ff. Much of *God: His Nature and Existence* is reproduced verbatim from Garrigou's *Le sens commun: le philosophe de l'être et les formules dogmatiques* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1909, 1922). For the specific critique of Bergson, see *Le sens commun*, Chapter one, section three: 'Consèquences du nominalisme bergsonien: Négation de la raison et de la valeur objective du principle de non-contradiction'. The *tone* of Garrigou's Thomism is of course unique to his era; one may wonder, however, whether the persistent interest of analytic philosophy of religion, including analytic Thomism, in logic and 'possible worlds theory'. constitutes any advance or change on Baroque scholasticism.

[16] Étienne Fouilloux, *Une Église en quête de liberté: La pensée catholique française entre modernisme et Vatican II: 1914–1926* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1988), p. 51.

[17] Chenu, in *Jacques Duquesne interroge le père Chenu*, p. 38.

[18] Gilson, *Le philosophe et la théologie*, pp. 102–103.

[19] Gilson, *Le philosophe et la théologie*, pp. 102–103.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Neo-Thomists had structured Thomas' thought in what seemed to them the logical or 'natural' order. Lévy-Bruhl hadn't read Sanseverino or Garrigou-Lagrange, but he knew the ethics of Descartes, Kant, Leibniz. His *Ethics and Moral Science* contended that *science* is the study of facts, *what is*, and that theoretical ethics can't be a science because it is the definition of the empty possible world of *what ought to be*. Deflating Leibniz' hope of a mathematical science of ethics, Lévy-Bruhl argued that 'There can be no question of 'decreeing' in the name of a theory the rules of ethical practice.'[20] 'Practical ethics,' concrete behaviour patterns, really do exist, and it is this which sociology should study. Gilson was perhaps the only Catholic of his generation who thought it a terrific book.[21] Lévy-Bruhl was developing the sociological reductionism of Emile Durkheim. Gilson admired the way Durkheim 'conceived social facts like things.' He found in Durkheim the 'spirit of Leviticus': 'You don't eat the eagle, the bearded vulture or the osprey,' not because you can justify this diet rationally, but because Yahweh says so. The precepts and interdictions of Leviticus are social facts. Gilson saw no reason why a sociology should not be inspired by Leviticus.[22]

Gilson described Lévy-Bruhl, his doctoral supervisor, as having a 'gift for seeing facts in an . . . objective light, just as they were. As soon as I had attended' his 'course of lectures in Hume, I realized that, to me, to understand any philosophy would always mean to approach it as I had seen Lucien Lévy-Bruhl approach that of Hume.'[23] Lévy-Bruhl thought that study of the social organization of any given society would explain the individual 'conscience' of its members.[24] The place where Lévy-Bruhl's influence exerts itself is that Gilson sees the *Summa* as having a given order, which can't be remodeled on an ideal schema without altering what Thomas is actually saying.

Gilson's book on Thomas' philosophy went through six editions between 1914 and 1965, tripling in size, adding new touches, and a complete recolouring job in 1942. The constant feature is the description of the theological architecture of the two *Summae*. Gilson sees the plan of the *Summa*e as working in two directions. The first direction is the *order* of reality which *Summae* are set in. A philosophical *order* is one which looks up to God through the prism of creaturely things. A theological ordering of reality is the picture of

[20] L. Lévy-Bruhl *Ethics and Moral Science*, translated by Elizabeth Lee (French: 1903, English, London: Archibald Constable & Co Ltd, 1905), p. 80.

[21] According to Lawrence Shook, Gilson called *La morale et la science des moeurs* an 'almost incredible book': Laurence K. Shook C.S.B., *Étienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, 1984), p. 11. At its publication, in 1903, the Louvain Thomist, Simon Deploige began a campaign against the book which Maritain was still pushing on with in 1923.

[22] Gilson, *Le philosophe et la théologie*, 31–33.

[23] Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941, 1955), xiii.

[24] Lévy-Bruhl, *Ethics and Moral Science*, p. 21.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

reality as God would paint it, which we see in the light of faith. For Gilson, Thomas' order is theological: the spectacle conveyed by the *Summa* is achieved by the writer's considering reality as God does. The second direction is how Thomas goes about *demonstrating* his conclusions: now he works the other way, through Aristotelian, sense-based arguments. Gilson is distinguishing the *order of exposition* of the *Summae*, which he takes to be theological, from their *principles of demonstration*, which he thinks are philosophical. The argument which goes through all six editions is that Thomas scales his 'bottom up' arguments to fit a 'top-down' order.

Gilson offended the sensibilities of contemporary Thomists by beginning his book on Thomas with God, rather than cosmology or logic. And he stuck to it, despite a stern admonition from a Thomist journal that he would do better to present Saint Thomas the other way up. That came from the Dominican Pierre Mandonnet, who thought that Gilson must be *deducing* the world of the senses from God, by putting God first.[25] Mandonnet had moved to Le Saulchoir after the Great War. He developed Gardeil's methodology, teaching his students to relate Thomas' work to its historical context, the era of the rise of the cities.[26] Two journals were now founded at the Belgian Studium – the *Bulletin Thomiste* and the *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*. It was the *Bulletin Thomiste* which carried this negative review of Gilson's *Le Thomisme*. Mandonnet defended the philosophical exposition of the *Summae* on the grounds that Thomas conceived it as 'natural' for human knowledge to progress from 'posterior analytics,' to sense knowledge to ethics to the metaphysical.[27]

Chenu sent his first letter to Gilson from Le Saulchoir in 1923. It is an offer to put him in touch with an English translator for *Le Thomisme* – Edward Bullough, whom Chenu had lately met in Cambridge.[28] His second missive hatched in the publication details, and a friendship was born. But his review of the third, 1927 edition of *Le Thomisme* shows that Chenu was not won round. It claimed that Gilson's distinction between theological order and philosophical demonstrations was specious. The Saulchoir Dominicans were not authoritarian anti-modernists, fearsome of the pollution of reason by faith. But they were anti-Platonists, wanting to safeguard 'nature'. Chenu argued that Thomas composed a 'pure philosophy,' 'autonomous' from faith.[29] Chenu was Mandonnet's disciple in the historical

[25] Pierre Mandonnet, O.P. Review of *Le Thomisme: Introduction au système de S. Thomas d'Aquin*, 1923; *The Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, translated by E. Bullough, 1924, by É. Gilson. Le Saulchoir, *Bulletin Thomiste*, vol. I (1924–6): 132–136 (136).

[26] Fouilloux, *Une Église en quête de liberté*, pp. 127–128.

[27] Mandonnet, Review of *Le Thomisme*, (135).

[28] Chenu to Étienne Gilson, 5 November, 1923, in the Saulchoir Archives, Saint Jacques, Paris, filed under Correspondence: Étienne Gilson à M.-D. Chenu/Chenu à Gilson.

[29] Marie-Dominique Chenu, Review, 'E. Gilson, *Le Thomisme. Introduction au système de S. Thomas d'Aquin*', *Bulletin Thomiste* vol I (January 1928), 242–245 (244).

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

understanding of the *Summa*: both of them were standing up for Thomas' *humanism*.

In the early 1930s, Gilson became embroiled in a public debate about whether there is such a thing as *Christian* philosophy. Gilson defended the principle that faith can influence philosophy. The opponents of Christian philosophy included both secularist philosophers and continental Thomists. The Thomists feared losing the tactical advantage of being able to do apologetics on a purely rational basis. Chenu remained, with his Saulchoir confrères, a staunch opponent of Christian philosophy, until September 1933.[30] Then, at the last 'Christian philosophy' debate, Chenu and Yves Congar literally sat down alongside Gilson.[31]

Gilson may have earned his friend's alliance with his opening lecture as professor of medieval thought at the Sorbonne – delivered in April 1932. The lecture is called 'The Middle Ages and the Naturalism of the Ancients.' Gilson began by saluting his Sorbonne teachers, Lévy-Bruhl and Henri Bergson. The sociologist made him a textual scholar who could pick out the individuality of the mediaevals. But Bergson taught him to look beyond a thinker's now dead words and formulae to the still-living act of thinking which engendered the texts. Gilson sets up a triptych, a three-fold study in contrasting attitudes to 'nature.' On the left panel, there is Luther, representing the rejection of nature, in favour of grace alone. In the centre, Gilson places the mediaevals, believers in the *healing*, rather than the *replacement*, of nature by grace. The right hand panel depicts Erasmus. Gilson is making Erasmus and Luther mirror one another. Few Dominicans wanted to see themselves as a mirror image of Luther, certainly not Chenu. Gilson creates the Luther-Erasmus mirroring by claiming that the Middle Ages had their own humanism, and contrasting it with Erasmus'. Erasmian humanism consisted in studying texts as dead, closed, finished: that's why it tore away the glosses and commentaries, to get back at the 'original sources.' Conversely, the humanism of the mediaevals was their assumption that the ancient Greeks and Romans were living partners in a dialogue with themselves. The Mediaeval humanists' Aristotle was sufficiently alive and kicking to be taken to the baptismal font. Chenu will quote a page of the lecture at the beginning of his *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*: 'What Albert the Great or

[30] So, for instance, in reference to the defence of 'Christian philosophy,' in Gilson's *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (1932), Chenu pointed out that this phrase only came into existence in 1535–8, when it was first used by Javelli. See Marie-Dominique Chenu, 'Note pour l'histoire de la notion de philosophie chrétienne,' *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, (1932, vol 21) 231–5. Chenu would later call *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 'Gilson's most beautiful book': See Chenu's 'L'interprète de Saint Thomas d'Aquin,' p. 45. *The Spirit* is, I think, the work of Gilson's to which Chenu refers the most often, and the most affectionately.

[31] Fouilloux, *Une Église en quête de liberté*, p. 153.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Saint Thomas asked of these Ancients was not so much to tell them what they had formerly been in Greece or in Rome, but rather what . . . they . . . would have become, if they had lived in Christian territory in the XIIIth century. . . . The historian who meets them in those surroundings is . . . torn between the admiration of the depth with which the thinkers of the Middle Ages understand them . . . and . . . the disquietude that an archaeologist might feel were the bas relief he was studying suddenly to turn into a living and changing thing.'[32]

Gilson wasn't going to change Chenu's mind by holding him down to a test to which he did not subscribe. Gilson's lecture may have made his friend see that the current Saulchoirist conceptions of history and humanism were inherited from Erasmus, not the mediaevals. The gauntlet Gilson threw down to Le Saulchoir was to look at what happened to the mediaevals' Greek sources once they got inside the minds of Christian theologians. Thomas didn't read Aristotle in the way that Erasmus or Lévy-Bruhl would do. Once inside Thomas' mind, Aristotle or 'nature' were not static, fossilised essences but a living spirit capable of creative evolution. Gilson was depicting the working of Thomas' mind like Bergsonian creative evolution, a plastic force, appropriating Aristotle's sap and remaking it under the water of baptism.

Chenu quotes Gilson's paper, obliquely and directly, for the rest of his life. He refers to it in his article of 1935, 'Position de la théologie': 'Christian humanism' is the lucid acceptance of [the] . . . coherence of faith and reason, on the very ground of faith . . . This exaltation of reason in theological work, is the supreme consecration of nature in grace. This is why Luther simultaneously abominated theology and humanism. This is what we have to hold on to, because their fate is bound together.'[33] Chenu's article argues that Christian faith positions theological reason so that it faces *historical facts*. Chenu describes the *principles* of faith, the light in which it works, as *historical*: 'the theologian works on an history. His 'given' is not in the nature of things, it is *events* . . . the real world is here, and not [in] the philosophical abstraction.'[34] Chenu contrasts the timeless axioms on which the Roman Thomists built their anti-modernist objectivism with what

[32] Marie Dominique Chenu, *Towards Understanding Saint Thomas*, translated by A.-M. Landry OP and D. Hughes OP (French: *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 1950, English: Chicago: Henry Regnery Co, 1963), p. xx, citing É. Gilson, 'Le Moyen Age et le naturalisme antique,' *leçon d'ouverture du cours d'histoire de la philosophie au Moyen Age, au Collège de France*, in *Arch. hist. doctr. litt. du. M.A.*, pp. 5–37 (35). The whole lecture is accessible as an appendix to Gilson's *Héloise et Abélard* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1938).

[33] Marie-Dominique Chenu, 'Position de la théologie,' *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* (1935), reprinted in Chenu, *La parole de Dieu: La foi dans l'intelligence* (Paris: Cerf, 1964), 115–137 (134–135) citing Gilson, 'Le Moyen Age et le naturalisme antique.'

[34] Ibid., p. 128.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

he takes to be the authentic locus of realism, the *historical facts* which faith makes us attend to.

Gilson told Chenu to look for the word 'fact' in *Christianisme et philosophie*, since his use of it came from Chenu's 'Position' paper.[35] Gilson's most aggressive book, *Réalisme thomiste* (1939), which takes on every variety of Thomism from the Roman-logical through the Transcendental to the 'critical-realist,' develops Chenu's point, that one can't get 'realism' out of axioms, only from facts.

Chenu sailed close to the wind: 'Saint Thomas. . . . took the contingent history of Christ as the determining theme of the Incarnation, . . . and resisted the temptation to situate the God-man at the summit of an ideally achieved world order. . . . 'The incarnation, after all, is only a fact,' the witty remark of a theologian wholly dedicated to the treatise *De Deo*. A witty remark . . . which candidly unveils the powerlessness of theology before a *fact*, which cannot be grasped by science.'[36]

In 1932, Chenu was made Regent of Le Saulchoir. It was as Regent, in 1937, that he gave the sermon for the Feast of Saint Thomas. This became *Le Saulchoir*: *Une école de théologie*, the text in which Chenu describes formation at Le Saulchoir. The first chapter is on the history of Dominican teaching in France, including, of course, Saint Thomas, Chenu's predecessor as regent of the French Studium. The second chapter, 'Spirit and Methods,' depicts the purpose of students' 'exegesis' of the *Summa* at Le Saulchoir as achieving "direct contact with the working mind of saint Thomas, . . . enter[ing] into the movement of his thought, of his "disputed questions," following right down to his verbal progress the creative effort of his thought, and thus to attain beyond his reasonings and conclusions, the postulates which secretly command them, unveiling" his "intellectual stimulus."[37]

The message is in the lay-out, and the third chapter, on theology, comes before the chapter on philosophy. Chenu speaks of the revealed basis of theology as having two faces. One is the timeless Word of God: "The knowledge of God in me. . . . put[s] me in dialogue and direct commerce with Him, the mysterious presence to which the 'new man' has access . . . faith is the operation which renders us 'contemporaries' of Christ."[38] But the "Son of God is an historical personage," and the other side of revelation is the *historical*, relative, propositions in which the history is told. The two faces of revelation are like the two natures of Christ, divine and human.[39] Next to

[35] Gilson to Marie-Dominique Chenu, 29 April 1936, in the Saulchoir archives, Saint Jacques, Paris. This is the same letter in which he asks for an 'imprimatur.'

[36] Chenu, 'Position de la théologie,' p. 129.

[37] Chenu, *Une école de théologie: le Saulchoir*, p. 124.

[38] Ibid., p. 136.

[39] This theme in Chenu's theology is brought to the fore by Christophe Potworowski, in *Contemplation and Incarnation: The Theology of Marie-Dominique Chenu* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

revelation, or Christ, with his two aspects, Chenu puts the theologian, making Thomas and his heirs *alteri Christi*. The "theologian is he who dares to speak humanly the Word of God."[40] The theologian also has 'two natures': on the human side, which is time-bound, his 'system,' and, on the divine side, the side in communion with God, his *spirituality*. Chenu is thinking of a theologian's spirituality as the creative stimulus, which engenders a system. The passage which exercised a generation of Dominican provincials was this: "That which is definitive in theological systems is only the expression of spiritualities.... The greatness and the truth of Bonaventuran or Scotist Augustinianism are entirely in the spiritual experience of Saint Francis which becomes the soul of his sons; the grandeur and the truth of Molinism are in the spiritual experience of Saint Ignatius' *Exercises*.... A theology worthy of the name is a spirituality which finds the rational instruments adequate to its religious experience. It is not by an accident of history that Saint Thomas has entered the order of Saint Dominic ... The institution and the doctrine are closely allied with one another ... in the contemplation which ... guarantees the fervour, the method ... and the freedom of their spirit.... There could be no worse disgrace for Thomism, whose whole native effort is to justify the status of human intelligence within Christianity, than to be treated as an 'orthodoxy."'[41]

The discussion of philosophy begins before the chapter given to it. Chenu claims that a theologian can truly "call himself an Aristotelian", if he takes those steps in psychology or metaphysics, "but he is so only under the auspices of a spiritual assumption outside the format of Aristotelianism"[42]: when the theologian uses a philosophy, nature is assumed into grace. The philosophy chapter discusses how "modern scholasticism" adopted a false "ideal of intelligibility," "under the patronage of Leibniz". The chapter is a series of undisguised sideswipes at "the philosophy of the clerical functionaries of Joseph II"[43]: Gilson will go and do likewise in *Réalisme thomiste*.

Chenu's pamphlet occasioned a sense of humour failure in Rome. Within a year, Chenu had been summoned to Rome to sign Ten Propositions, one of which states that Thomas' doctrine is orthodox.[44] Gilson wrote to Père Gillet on his behalf, but achieved only a stay of execution. Writing to his friend a few days after the pamphlet was put on the Index, in February 1942, Gilson observed, "we are once again

[40] Chenu, *Une école de théologie: le Saulchoir*, p. 144.
[41] Ibid. pp. 148–9.
[42] Ibid., p. 148.
[43] Ibid., pp. 153 and 157.
[44] The ten propositions which Chenu was required to sign in 1938 are set out in R. Guelluy, 'Les Antécédents de l'Encyclique Humani Generis dans les sanctions romaines de 1942: Chenu, Charlier, Draguet,' *Revue D'histoire Ecclesiastique* (1986 Vol 81) 421–497 (461–462). There is also a facsimile in Chenu's *Une école de théologie*: *Le Saulchoir*, p. 35. This 1985 reprint of *Une école* contains a number of helpful historical essays about the pamphlet, by Giuseppe Alberigo, Étienne Gouilloux, Jean Ladrière and Jean-Pierre Jossua.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

suffering an attack of anti-Protestantism."[45] Chenu lost his post as Regent at Le Saulchoir, and was forbidden to teach for over a decade. He had de-absolutized Thomas' system, as a system, and allowed for a plurality of spiritualities. To Garrigou, and Gillet, and Browne, this was out and out fideism.[46]

In 1936, Gilson was so worried that he himself was turning into a fideist, that he asked Chenu for his personal 'imprimatur' on his latest book, *Christianisme et philosophie*. Thomas states that it is impossible to hold a proposition by faith and by reason simultaneously. This exercised Gilson's imagination. The problem was that he wanted to say that Thomas' philosophical idea of God was *conditioned* and qualified by his revealed, faith-given sense of what God is like. Gilson remembered what Lévy-Bruhl had to say about Leibniz' 'natural ethics,' and, about Voltaire's "'natural religion,' with which it has close affinities."[47] According to Lévy-Bruhl, 'natural religion' "was only the European monotheism of preceding centuries, reduced to the shadowy and abstract form of a rationalist deism."[48] As Gilson puts it, in 1940, in *God and Philosophy*, "As an object of religious worship... the God of the Deists was but the wraith of the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."[49] *God and Philosophy* was the book in which Gilson thought he had cracked the problem of how to interpret Aquinas. He told Chenu, "No doubt they will say I interpret Saint Thomas in the light of Kirkegaard."[50] He argues that the God of the philosophers is a static, conceptual *essence*. Essences are definable – essences in reality correspond to concepts in our minds. Existence is more concretely given to us than any conceptual essence. But *existence* is indefinable: it's obvious that we exist, but we can't put a name to the face. At the Exodus, God tells Moses his name – I am that I am. Because Thomas' God is the concretely-named Biblical God, Thomas recognised that God is *existence*. It took revelation for Thomas to touch on this bedrock – God is pure existing. *God and Philosophy* describes the history of philosophy as coxing and boxing between the conceptualists, defining God as an essence, and the mystics, who preach an unknowable God.

[45] Gilson to Marie-Dominique Chenu, 28 February 1942, in the Saulchoir archives. On receiving the news from Chenu, Gilson wrote to him twice in two days; this is the second one, written after he had re-read *Une école*. Both Gilson and Maritain made sustained efforts to get the ban on Chenu's teaching lifted; these were unsuccessful.

[46] Yves Congar records his 1954 discussion of the passage with Browne in *Journal d'un théologien: 1946–1956* (Paris: Cerf, 2000), pp. 330–331.

[47] L. Lévy-Bruhl *Ethics and Moral Science*, p. 161.

[48] Ibid., p. 162.

[49] Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, p. 107. I owe my noticing this quotation to Paul Molnar's reference to it, in *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London/New York: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2002).

[50] Gilson's spelling of the Danish philosopher's name. Gilson to Marie-Dominique Chenu, 5 February 1942, in the Saulchoir archives, Saint Jacques, Paris.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Gilson told Chenu, in 1942, "Saint Thomas appears to me as a perfect equilibrium, but a concealed mystery is part of that equilibrium, and, as we conceptualize whatever we can, the danger will always be . . . to break that equilibrium in conceptualizing his mystery, that is to say, in evacuating it." Something in Aquinas must escape the pedagogue who wants to press him into wordy apologetics. Gilson's letter concludes, "This is why one cannot *teach* Saint Thomas."[51]

A few weeks before his expulsion from Le Saulchoir, Chenu wrote to thank Gilson for his copy of the new edition of *Le Thomisme*. He remarks that the "axis has been recreated: 'Haec sublimis veritas'!"[52] The "sublime truth" is God's revealed name, 'I am.' Gilson observes that, "because we have forgotten" that Thomas "always speaks concretely about the concrete . . . we have . . . changed into a logic of pure essences a doctrine which its author had conceived as an explanation of facts."[53] Speaking "concretely about the concrete" means that the God of Moses casts his enchantment on the God of the philosophers; the conceptual bones are given life by divine existence. It was about this time that Gilson began to speak of a 'metaphysics of the Exodus,' a philosophy inspired by revelation.[54]

It required some ecclesiastical maneuvering, including a letter from Gilson to the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, for Chenu to publish *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, in 1950. Gilson objected to the monochrome essentialism of Neo-Thomism. What Chenu rejected in Thomist seminary pedagogy was that it made Thomas speak in a syllogistic monotone. He wanted to point students to the diversity of Thomas' discourse. His book introduces readers to Thomas by explaining the "literary forms" which he used. The reason why the *way* Thomas spoke can't be separated out from his ideas is that, for the scholastics "Thinking was a 'craft,' the governing principles of which were fixed down to the last detail."[55] Chenu presents Thomas as a theologian craftsman, a worker-priest, as it were. Thomas made different kinds of books, so Chenu's portrait is a series of scenes, showing Thomas at work constructing the Aristotle and Dionysius

[51] Ibid.

[52] Chenu to Étienne Gilson, 4 February, 1942, in the Saulchoir archives, Saint Jacques, Paris.

[53] Gilson is remarking adversely on Cajetan's adage, *semper formalissime loquitur Divus Thomas*: *Le Thomisme: Introduction à la philosophie de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1942, 1944, fifth edition); English, *The Christian Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Lawrence K Shook (London, Victor Gollancz, 1961), p. 11. Chenu comments in the same vein on Cajetan's formula, in *Towards Understanding Saint Thomas*, pp. 117–121: 'With his *formaliter*, Cajetan gave us only one side of Saint Thomas' (p. 121).

[54] Gilson's 1931–1932 Gifford lectures, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, which is not a history book but an historical defence of the principle that Christian philosophy can and does exist, begin to articulate this theme. But I think the first use of the phrase 'metaphysics of the Exodus' is in Gilson's *L'être et l'essence* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1948), p. 291.

[55] Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, p. 60.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

commentaries, the Bible commentaries, the commentaries on Lombard and Boethius, Disputed Questions – theology for theologians – the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and finally the *Summa Theologiae*, which is theology for students. Chenu shows the material and the tools which the craftsman used: the *lectio*, or the reading, the *questio* and the *dialectic* – theology at work, "build[ing] itself up out of the expression of mysteries by way of problems."[56]

Once one has brought oneself to recognize the diversity in the *Summa*, how is one to pull it all together? The figures in Byzantine religious pictures, and also in Renaissance paintings are organized within a circle. Chenu argues that the *Summa Theologiae* is modeled on a circle: in the 1st part, we see God, and reality emanating from him; the 2nd part journeys through humanity's return toward God; the Christology of the 3rd part closes the circle by showing the means by which humanity is deified. Painters frame their figures in a circle so that they won't be standing about awkwardly all over the canvas. According to Chenu, Thomas puts the facts he's presenting in a circle to show their intelligibility: the rounded structure of theology reflects the divine *science*, the way God knows himself. He says, "The oneness of theology is really the oneness of the mystery at its heart."[57]

Some critics think that when Chenu gave the *Summa* a circular structure, he showed himself a true disciple of Garrigou after all – a rationalist, who funked the irregular contingencies of history and slid the Incarnation off into a blind corner of Thomas' theology.[58] Chenu wavered to none in his humanism, but he would find that criticism *anthropocentric*. A non-Lutheran, Chenu believed that, "the object of theology is not properly and primarily the economy, by which man is the recipient of faith and grace through Christ, but rather it is God in his very reality."[59] God is the object of Thomas' theology, because he does not only use *demonstration* – arguing *to* God – but also *resolution* – arguing *from* God's being. The cosmos gets its unity from the diverse ways its elements imitate God.[60] Behind Thomas' toughest demonstrations, there's a *religious* feeling for the cosmos as being 'like the divine artist.'

Chenu wants to show that the *Summa* is diverse but unified, by analogy, as is the cosmos in relation to God; that the figures in the three parts of the *Summa* are doing different but analogous things. Thomas' use of metaphysical concepts is analogous to his use of revealed ones: "the *analogia entis* does its work at the heart of an

[56] Ibid., p. 99.
[57] Ibid., p. 309.
[58] Potworowski, *Contemplation and Incarnation*, pp. 207–213 and 229, citing numerous critiques of Chenu on this point. In my recollection, Hans Urs von Balthasar also levels the same accusation.
[59] Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, p. 307.
[60] Ibid., pp. 188–191; Chenu, *Aquinas' Role in Theology*, pp. 85–89.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

analogia fidei."[61] So one can't pull out any one topic or kind of argument or section, and say it's the only part Thomas cared for; all the parts are organically inter-related.

The tool which the Scholastic craftsman always has to hand is dialectic. Chenu shows that this brush comes in many sizes. Thomas's demonstrations have varied "tonalities."[62] He sometimes proves conclusions from effects, and sometimes takes the proof back to the cause of the effects: "The dialectics of beatitude . . . unfolds from starting points and with overtones differing greatly from the . . . steps from which the five proofs of God's existence take their departure."[63] Different again are the "suitabilities" Thomas uses to etch in his "'modest and dialectical solution[s]'" to the problems raised by the mystery of the Trinity and Incarnation.

Chenu wanted to see a single pattern running through the syllogisms, demonstrations from cause, and loose Trinitarian suitabilities. Thomas, the master-craftsman is not making a set of disparate pictures when he paints the scenes with his different brush strokes. As Chenu sees it, Thomas' sequence of sacred mysteries are *analogous* to each other. He speaks of Thomas travelling toward God not "on the routes of the philosophy of nature" but through a path marked by the "logic of the analogous." This journey has a "religious atmosphere"[64]: it is governed by the sense of 'that sublime truth' of the dependence of created being on God's existence. The structure of the *Summa* is presented as showing that everything comes around to God.

[61] Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, p. 165.
[62] Ibid., p. 178.
[63] Ibid., p. 179.
[64] Ibid, p. 165.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00032.x Published online by Cambridge University Press