

thinker worth our attention? Even the Pre-Socratics in their own ways deliberated on whether ‘fires enjoy their dancing’ (44). So while Burge is a great iterative thinker, he is not all what Ted Honderich makes him out to be.

Noam Chomsky’s ‘Simple Truths, Hard Problems: Some Thoughts on Terror, Justice, and Self-Defence’ (273–92) is the usual rant from someone who is unwilling to settle outside the US, but is willing to comment on poor nations while doling out scholarships to those of his impoverished acolytes he considers are most Chomskian than Chomsky himself. In a moment of rare insight, Chomsky writes that he thought of calling his piece: ‘In Praise of Platitudes’ (274). In his linguistic theories elsewhere which Chomsky passes on as his own, without ever referring to the idea that each letter of the Sanskrit alphabet corresponds to a ‘matrika’ and thus language is existentially contingent, we have him at last having a break from his usual narcissistic harangues. At least, he realises he is banal.

This book reads like a penny dreadful. This with the caveat, most penny dreadfuls were better than this weird anthology.

Subhasis Chattopadhyay



Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Biography

Bernard McGinn

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Bernard McGinn explains existence according to the *Summa Theologiae*:

The pure act of existence is not a concept, a property or an attribute. Rather, it is what we affirm when we make the judgment *that* God is. In this sense, questions 3 to 13 of the *Prima Pars* are an exercise in transcendental tautology in which we learn that our attempts to capture the absolute simpleness of God in human language simply cannot apply to God. Because there is no difference in God between his essence and his existence, or between his perfections and his nature,

all statements such as ‘God is good’ or ‘God is perfect’ can be reduced to the formula, ‘To be God is to be’. In Thomas’s view, the wisdom of *sacra doctrina* is not learning more of *what* can be said about God, but in coming to appreciate more and more fully the mystery of God’s unknowable existence by exploring how language falls short of knowing or naming God (84–5).

Bernard McGinn does an excellent job in writing the history of the *Summa* which

is a massive work, containing over a million and a half words divided into three large parts containing 512 topics (*quaestiones*) and no fewer than 2,668 articles (*articuli*) dealing with particular issues (some topics are given only two articles; the longest receives seventeen). In the translation of the English Dominicans published in the early decades of the past century the *Summa* takes up 2,565 double-column pages. Even more daunting is the vast literature that has been devoted to explaining the *Summa*. Although the work was contentious from the start, and its history has had ups and downs, the *Summa* has never lacked for readers and commentators (2).

Despite the book’s length and its complexities, it exerts an influence on the Christian mind only as much as the works of Acharya Shankara continues to do so on the Hindu mind. This is a fact that McGinn, who is an expert on the historiography of Christianity, does not mention in the book under review. Nonetheless, he summarises the effect of the *Summa* well: ‘The interest of Jewish philosophers in the thought of Thomas as a way to counter Averroistic readings of Aristotle that conflicted with the Hebrew Bible, something that had begun in the late thirteenth century with thinkers like Rabbi Hillel of Verona and Jehudah ben Daniel Romano, continued on during the fourteenth century’ (136).

McGinn, in his hurry to really summarise the *Summa*, forgets to write that the *Summa* is the bridge between St Augustine of Hippo’s works and the works of the postmodernists like Hannah Arendt and Jean Francois Lyotard. Without Thomas’s mediation, St Augustine would not have come to us. And neither Arendt, nor Lyotard would have worked on Augustine and

postmodernism in Western letters would not have begun, with Arendt, and closed, with Lyotard. Also, McGinn does not understand that High Continental modernism in philosophy would not have been possible had not the *Summa* been written. Martin Heidegger's stress on the non-displaceability of the 'Logos' was borrowed from St Thomas. These aporias in constructing the life-history of the *Summa* are all the more jarring since McGinn mentions the Jesuit economist, Bernard Lonergan (137).

McGinn does not introduce Lonergan, as he deserves to have been. In a certain sense, the book under review is patchy compared to other books in this Princeton series. David Gordon White's *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* is a more mature history of the *Yoga Sutra* than McGinn could construct for the *Summa*.

For the neophyte to Christianity, this book is a good beginning. One only needs to remember that the *Summa* is a narrative. Like all narratives, it is constrained by a *fabula* and a *syuzhet*. Unlike, say the *Yoga Sutras*, which are experiential and are methods for attaining samadhi in the here and the now, the *Summa* contains foregone inflexible conclusions that are supposed to be unchanging and timeless forever and ever. This review begins with quotations from the *Summa* referred to by McGinn in this book. These statements on the nature of God presuppose many fixed narratives on God. These then are passed off as philosophy. This is the difference between the East and the West. The West passes off theology as philosophy, and Eastern philosophers struggle to prove that theirs is a philosophy and they are not theologians. McGinn's hardbound book is a pleasure to read and to keep in one's library.

This review cannot do justice to McGinn unless we quote McGinn on Karl Rahner:

[Bernard] Lonergan's contemporary, the German Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904–84), took a different route to ... philosophical Thomism. ... Rahner claims that ... 'Thomism formed my philosophy and, at a step removed, my theology'. Not everyone was convinced about the authenticity of this reading of Aquinas. When Rahner went off a few years later to study philosophy at Freiburg under Martin Heidegger and Martin

Honecker, the thesis he prepared on Thomas's theory of knowledge, specifically on what the Dominican meant by 'conversion to the phantasm' as integral to human knowing, was not accepted by Honecker due to its radical interpretation of Thomas. Completed in 1936 and published in 1939, this work, *Spirit in the World* (English version 1967), is rightly seen as central to Rahner's later immense output. Rahner did not intend to write a historical study of Thomas, but rather a reliving of Thomas's 'philosophy as it unfolds', which, not unlike Lonergan, pushed Thomas beyond what he explicitly says, but in a direction that the author still claims is what Thomas would have said in the post-Kantian philosophical world (204–5).

It is indeed true that both Rahner and Lonergan are mistakenly thought to be Transcendental Thomists (205), but McGinn misses one point about the intellectual ontologies of both Rahner and Lonergan. Both were sons of St Ignatius of Loyola and their lives and thought were only apparently influenced by St Thomas. They had to live with the anxiety of the *Summa*, but were in fact both subsumed by St Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*. These Transcendental and neo-Thomists were only crypto-Thomists; they were moulded by Vatican II and the Ignatian *magis*. The latter is anti-scholastic in a very technical manner. McGinn's otherwise well-crafted book does not consider the fact that post the counter-Reformation in Europe; every Christian theologian willy-nilly discarded Thomism in its classical form.

Rahner is undoubtedly the greatest Roman Catholic theologian of the last century; and yet unlike what McGinn says of Rahner's *Spirit in the World*, whatever it is, it is not about Thomism or neo-Kantian theology. It is in fact a reworking of centuries of Jesuit theologising before Rahner. McGinn does not understand that both Lonergan and Rahner though normatively Thomists; due to their training as members of the Society of Jesus were more pragmatic than Thomas. They were in fact anti-Thomists, being anti-scholastic. McGinn should have been a little more careful when synoptically reading Lonergan and Rahner.

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