

Averroes and The Triumph of Saint Thomas Aquinas



Francesco Traini (active 1320-65) or Lippo Memmi (active 1317-56)

The Triumph of Saint Thomas Aquinas, ca. 1332-40

Tempera on panel

375 x 258 cm

Church of Santa Caterina d'Alessandria, Pisa

Museo nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa

The subject of this altarpiece is usually described as the Triumph of St Thomas Aquinas. In it the saint is depicted with open books in his hands and on his lap, receiving inspiration from above via Christ, Paul, Moses, and the Evangelists, and from below via Aristotle and Plato. However Averroës lies at his feet.

St Thomas had just been canonised in 1323

Santa Caterina was the Dominican Church in Pisa and was [the Church of Archbishop Saltarelli](#)



Giovanni di Paolo c.1399–1482
St. Thomas Aquinas Confounding Averroës
1445–50
Tempera and gold leaf on panel
24.7 x 26.2 cm
Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225 or 1227–1274) stands at the lectern flanked by Christian thinkers discussing the sleeping Muslim philosopher Averroës (1126–98).

By placing Saint Thomas directly above the prone figure, the artist symbolically elevates Aquinas's teachings over those of Averroës.

Originally a cover for the Sienese treasury's records, this panel included a lower half with the heraldic emblems of the treasury officers' families



Benozzo Gozzoli (c. 1421 – 1497)
The Triumph of St Thomas Aquinas
1471

Tempera on panel
230 x 102 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris

The inscription beneath the glory containing Christ expresses his agreement with the theological writings of St Thomas Aquinas: *BENE SCPSISTI DE ME, THOMMA* ("You have written well about me, Thomas").

The saint is enthroned in the centre between Aristotle and Plato.

At his feet lies the Arabic scholar Averroes, whose writings he refuted.

In the lower part of the picture a group of clergymen can be seen on either side of the pope, who according to Vasari is Sixtus IV.

The Triumph of Saint Thomas over the Arabic scholar Averroes can also be seen in the [Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella](#), Florence, in a panel now in [the Lehman Collection](#), New York, some Quattrocento frescoes in [S. Domenico, Spoleto](#), and [the Carafa Chapel, S. Maria sopra Minerva](#), Rome

In the second half of the twelfth century and throughout most of the thirteenth century wide-ranging translation of texts both from Arabic and from Greek into Latin had made available to the Christian West a vast body of philosophical and scientific literature to which that world had previously not had access.

The newly translated sources included practically all of Aristotle's works which are known to us, a series of classical commentaries on Aristotle, important pseudo-Aristotelian works such as the *Liber de causis*, [philosophical writings originally written in Arabic by thinkers such as Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes](#)

Upon being faced so speedily with so much literature of non-Christian origins, Latin thinkers and Churchmen had to react quickly, and to try to determine how believing Christians should respond.

A council held in Paris in 1210 and new statutes for the Faculty of Arts at the University of Paris promulgated in 1215 by the Papal Legate prohibited "reading" Aristotle's *libri naturales*, his Metaphysics, and Commentaries or Summae of the same. The expression "reading" as used in these prohibitions is to be taken in the sense of lecturing.

In the late 1220s and early in the 1230s [Pope Gregory IX](#) cautioned masters of Theology at Paris against relying too heavily on philosophy in their teaching and continuing to prohibit Masters of Arts from using the *libri naturales* until they had been freed from every suspicion of error

St Thomas Aquinas served as Bachelor and then as Master of Theology at Paris from 1252-1259 and again as Master from 1269-1272 and was involved in spreading the teachings of Aristotle

During the 1260s, however, [another form of Aristotelianism](#) developed within the Arts Faculty, known as Latin Averroism or Radical Aristotelianism

In December 1270 the Bishop of Paris condemned thirteen propositions and excommunicated all who would knowingly defend or teach them.

Bonaventure's *Collationes in Hexaemeron* of 1273 shows his concern about various errors of Aristotle and those whom he calls the "Arabs."

On January 18, 1277, [Pope John XXI](#), known to most today as Peter of Spain, wrote to Bishop Tempier and asked him to conduct an inquiry about dangerous doctrines which were reported to be circulating at the University.

On March 7, 1277, [Stephen Tempier, Bishop of Paris](#), issued [a massive condemnation of 219](#) propositions along with the threatened excommunication of all who taught or even heard these propositions being taught unless they presented themselves to him or to the Chancellor (of the University) within seven days.

It was a landmark in the history of medieval philosophy and theology.

But it was [Aquinas' interpretation and reception of Aristotle](#) which held sway

[Pope Benedict XVI referred to this dispute in the University of Paris in a lecture](#) which he intended to give during a Visit to La Sapienza University in Rome on Thursday, 17 January 2008 but which was cancelled due to ignorant protests. The lecture was published instead

"Theology and philosophy in this regard form a strange pair of twins, in which neither of the two can be totally separated from the other, and yet each must preserve its own task and its own identity. It is the historical merit of Saint Thomas Aquinas – in the face of the rather different answer offered by the Fathers, owing to their historical context – to have highlighted the autonomy of philosophy, and with it the laws and the responsibility proper to reason, which enquires on the basis of its own dynamic.

Distancing themselves from neo-Platonic philosophies, in which religion and philosophy were inseparably interconnected, the Fathers had presented the Christian faith as the true philosophy, and had emphasized that this faith fulfils the demands of reason in search of truth; that faith is the "yes" to the truth, in comparison with the mythical religions that had become mere custom.

By the time the university came to birth, though, those religions no longer existed in the West – there was only Christianity, and thus it was necessary to give new emphasis to the specific responsibility of reason, which is not absorbed by faith.

Thomas was writing at a privileged moment: for the first time, the philosophical works of Aristotle were accessible in their entirety; the Jewish and Arab philosophies were available as specific appropriations and continuations of Greek philosophy.

Christianity, in a new dialogue with the reasoning of the interlocutors it was now encountering, was thus obliged to argue a case for its own reasonableness.

The faculty of philosophy, which as a so-called "arts faculty" had until then been no more than a preparation for theology, now became a faculty in its own right, an autonomous partner of theology and the faith on which theology reflected. We cannot digress to consider the fascinating consequences of this development.

I would say that Saint Thomas's idea concerning the relationship between philosophy and theology could be expressed using the formula that the Council of Chalcedon adopted for Christology: philosophy and theology must be interrelated "without confusion and without separation".

"Without confusion" means that each of the two must preserve its own identity. Philosophy must truly remain a quest conducted by reason with freedom and responsibility; it must recognize its limits and likewise its greatness and immensity."