

Monasteries dominated medieval intellectual life. There a theological agenda matured that spread to the universities that emerged in the thirteenth century: scholasticism. Scholasticism was Augustinian in several respects:

1. The seed of scholasticism had been germinating at least since Augustine’s maxim in *On the Predestination of Saints*: “Understand so that you may believe, believe so that you may understand.” Life in Christ is a journey into God’s presence, in which God’s grace transforms us by the renewing of our mind. Augustine’s soteriology gave scholasticism its theological rationale: Far more than “integration of faith and learning,” it is an exercise in sanctification.

2. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* also roots scholasticism in the work of another theologian: Boethius (480-524), who translated Aristotle and Porphyry and showed ways philosophy could aid theology. Augustine had paved the way for Boethius by his own use of Plotinus, Porphyry, and other “Egyptian gold” in the service of the Gospel. Boethius fed scholasticism’s disciplined use of philosophy, metaphysics, and liberal arts in order to build a coherent, total Christian intellectual curriculum. *This use of liberal arts and philosophy seems more a vision of the early Augustine than the late Augustine. So does the stress on this-worldly sanctification. What would the later Augustine have thought of scholasticism? Does Luther revive the “old Augustine” against the “young Augustine”?*

Yet Augustine’s thought was occasional rather than systematic. Scholastic reasoning was occasional *in being* systematic: It aimed to sanctify and enrich in a thorough, disciplined search for faithful Christian understanding. *Is systematization merely a recontextualization that may be necessary under certain historical and cultural conditions? Can an unsystematic tradition like Augustine’s (or Paul’s, or Luther’s, or Wesley’s) be systematized?*

3. Some of you have asked whether every Christian should be expected to know the things we’ve been studying this semester. The scholastic answer is “no.” Aristotle had divided human faculties into “the active way” of physical living, and “the contemplative way,” the purely mental reflection on the way things are. The former was for common folk, the latter for the “aristocracy.” Plotinus appropriated this distinction. Augustine transformed it into a Christian distinction: “the active life was the life of Christian virtue; the contemplative life . . . was found but rarely in Christian experience as a momentary enlightenment which was seen by the recipient as a glimpse of uncreated light, as of God himself” (Cunliffe-Jones, ed., 278).

Medieval Christian life forked back into the “common life” of laity and clergy, and the monastic life of those dedicated to prayer and meditation. The schoolmen sought these beatific visions in a kind of intellectual monasticism. *How is or isn’t this Augustine’s original answer?*

4. We might trace scholastic technique back to Augustine’s use of dialectical reasoning. *On Christian Doctrine* “contributed the organizing principle to the *Sententiae* of Peter Lombard” (*On Christian Doctrine*, trans. Robertson, xii), the universal textbook and paradigm of scholastic reasoning. But we should not overestimate Augustine’s influence on dialectics, which had many champions (*e.g.*, it was perfected in the *Sic et Non* of Peter Abelard, who was no Augustinian).

5. Then there is the sheer power of Augustine’s thought in later Western tradition. These centuries saw an Augustinian revival (Ferguson, X), and much of scholasticism interacted with Augustinian spirituality, theology, polity, and society. Yet scholastics *struggled* as much with Augustinianism as drew on it. Their world was being rocked by intellectual revolutions, especially a concurrent revival of Aristotle.

Augustine had “tamed” Platonism with and for the Christian faith, making Augustinian Platonism *the* Christian philosophy of the West. But with the reconquest of Spain, texts of Aristotle were recovered and read afresh. Soon the Western mind was being challenged by

problems Aristotle posed for Augustinians – such as his account of the life of virtue. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the rest had rooted virtue in *character*, which was formed by classical education and discipline (Dihle in MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 156). Remember, Augustine had maintained that real virtue depends upon God’s healing the *will*. This radical “Pauline” vision opposed the classical Greek traditions.

The Aristotelian revival in the thirteenth century was a direct challenge to Augustine’s vision – *i.e.*, Western Christendom’s entire ethics, politics, theology, and psychology. The threat to faith was something like that of Darwinism in the nineteenth century. “The past had provided a set of [authorities], both sacred and secular. The former could be reinterpreted, although not rejected. The latter could only be rejected when there was sufficient reason to reject them. Enquiry, therefore, had to proceed by counterposing authority to authority” (MacIntyre, 206).

Many condemned Aristotle without really addressing the issues (MacIntyre, 163), as poor apologetics do in every age. Many others embraced Aristotle too uncritically, and fractured the coherence of the Christian tradition. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) earned his place in history by rising to Aristotle’s challenge in a way both fair to the challenger, and true to the faith.

Aquinas does not merely supplement Aristotle, but ... he shows Aristotle’s account of the teleology of human life to be radically defective. That radical defectiveness in understanding turns out ... to be ... a radical defectiveness in that natural human order of which Aristotle gave his account. A strong thesis about the inadequacies and flaws of the natural human order emerges, so that the relationship of Aquinas’ Aristotelianism to his allegiance to Augustine appears in a new light. The Augustinian understanding of fallen human nature is used to explain the limitations of Aristotle’s arguments, just as the detail of Aristotle often corrects Augustine’s generalizations (MacIntyre, 205).

The *Summa Theologica* was poorly received by conservatives at first. But it eventually triumphed, becoming paradigmatic for later Catholic theology. Catholicism has developed a mandatory respect for a certain relationship of faith and reason, for “natural law,” for philosophical resources, for dialectical reasoning, for the depravity of unredeemed wills and the power of grace, for the development of tradition – all features we have learned to recognize as Augustinian, even when they come in forms Augustine could not have created.

Meanwhile others, less sympathetic to Aristotle, were destroying the synthesis of reason and faith Thomas had labored to create. Two Franciscans are worth mentioning: Duns Scotus (1265-1308) gave priority to love and will rather than reason and knowledge, emphasizing our inability to “ascend” to God through the senses. William of Ockham (1285-1347) championed the absolute omnipotence and radical freedom of God (even to issue different or contradictory commandments), and maintained the reliability only of the evidence of the senses (this led to “nominalism”). If Thomas shapes Augustinianism into its Catholic form, William takes it towards Lutheranism, and Duns Scotus more towards Zwingli and Calvin.

Moderns like to caricature scholastics for debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. While the movement did decline and fall after 1350, it seems to have maintained the vitality of Christian inquiry in an era of serious intellectual challenge. In fact, it basically created the university! You don’t hear modernists complaining about *that*!

If anything, scholasticism’s abuses seem to have arisen from unrealistic expectations. Scholasticism met the challenges of its day, then was pressed into service of unattainable goals. And while Protestantism is in a sense a rejection of its project, scholasticism has remained a vital force in Christian life, most notably in the continuing life of Thomism.

Still, I worry that its relocation of Augustinianism away from the common Church and into the monastery and university cannot help but distort it. We continue to suffer from an educational system that turns “contemplative” communities into intellectual monasteries, allowing impatient students to yearn for (or dread) “active” life in “the real world.” What would Augustine the bishop have thought?