

Chenu's Little Book

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Chenu is ninety. Although he may remain far less renowned in the English-speaking world than many of his juniors, such as Congar and de Lubac among his compatriots, not to mention Rahner, Lonergan, Hans Küng, and perhaps Hans Urs von Balthasar now, his intervention in the history of reading Aquinas, as well as the part that he played in the profound shift of Catholic consciousness that was precipitated by Vatican II, may well hold much greater promise of continuing significance.

What that significance might be is suggested by the republication, at the insistence of some of his friends, of the small book which he published in 1937, and which the Holy Office placed on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1942*.

(As a young Dominican, in 1958, I remember being admonished by the librarian, the late Fr Cornelius Ernst, who had himself drawn my attention to it, that, although the book stood on the open shelves of the study-house library, I needed special permission to read it. The Index was abolished in 1966.)

The biographical details are easily outlined. Marcel Chenu was born on 7 January 1895, at Soisy-sur-Seine. He joined the Dominicans in 1913, taking the religious name of Marie-Dominique, which he has used ever since. He studied in Rome, from 1914 to 1920, at the erstwhile Angelicum, now restyled acronymically as PUST. His thesis, on contemplation, was supervised by R. Garrigou-Lagrange, already over forty years of age and well into the fifty years of teaching at the Angelicum which gained him the reputation of being the leading Thomist of his day. He wanted Chenu to stay on in Rome as his assistant, but he was assigned to teach at Le Saulchoir, the study-house of the Paris Dominicans, then situated near Tournai in Belgium (because of the anticlerical laws of 1903 in France). From his earliest publications, in 1923, when he was twenty-eight, Chenu set himself against the non-historical exposition of the Thomist system that Garrigou-Lagrange practised. From the beginning he sought to read the movement of Aquinas's thought in its own historical context. Half a century of study bore fruit in his principal books: *La théologie comme science au XIIIe siècle* (1927); *Introduction à l'étude de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (1950); *La Théologie au douzième siècle* (1957); and *La Parole de Dieu* (1964), the two volumes that gathered up everything else.

On 7 March 1936, then the feast of St Thomas Aquinas, Chenu, as Regent of Studies, preached a sermon that so excited his brethren that he developed it into the fateful little book (some eighty pages of this new book) which he entitled *Une école de théologie: Le Saulchoir*. As he recalls, only seven or eight hundred copies were printed, and they were sold only at Le Saulchoir. Although it only came out towards the end of 1937, Chenu found himself in Rome at the beginning of February 1938, explaining unsuccessfully to the Dominican Curia why he should not be suspected of Modernism. He was forced to withdraw the book from circulation. (That same year, Le Saulchoir was in the middle of moving from Belgium to the site near Soisy-sur-Seine (!) which it occupied until 1971, when the library was moved to the centre of Paris.)

Unknown to Chenu, certain Dominicans in Rome continued to work on his little book. In February 1942, it was placed on the Index. There is no doubt that Garrigou-Lagrange played the key role. Chenu was deeply shocked, but he remembers the words that Cardinal Suhard said to him at the time: “Petit Père, ne vous troublez pas, dans vingt ans tout le monde parlera comme vous”. Prescient words, almost: twenty years later, in 1962, Chenu was about to be invited to Rome to take part as a theological adviser to the French-speaking bishops from Africa—but he would be the first to agree that the value of his beloved Aquinas had been largely occluded by Garrigou-Lagrange’s Thomism, and when that was rejected Chenu’s Aquinas was largely forgotten also. We may note, in passing, that Chenu’s essay was ‘condemned’ as a result of anxieties and machinations on the part of fellow Dominicans. There is no sign that anybody else was ever involved in any important way. That tells us a great deal about the rift, within the Order then, over the proper way to read Aquinas. Dominicans—no more than any other group in the Catholic Church—have seldom been free of internal dissension. (The principal characters in the story were French: no doubt, on a fuller account, it would turn out that they differed already over their attitude, say, to Action Française, and even to the French Revolution itself.)

What upset Garrigou-Lagrange and his allies in Rome and elsewhere? It is not difficult to guess, when one re-reads Chenu’s essay. The opening chapter traces the history of Dominican theology in Paris from the study-house of Saint-Jacques, established in 1229, to the return of Le Saulchoir “to the gates of Paris”, imminent in 1937. The second chapter begins with a quotation from a letter by George Tyrrell to Baron von Hügel, written in 1904, just a few weeks before Le Saulchoir regrouped in Belgium. There could be no doubt about “the intellectual and religious crisis that cut across Christianity at that time”, as Chenu notes. But he immediately insists on the vast amount that had been achieved, theologically, in the period from 1880

onwards—citing, among other things, the work of Duchesne, Batiffol, Lagrange, the foundation of *Revue biblique*, Mercier's Thomism at Louvain, Blondel's *L'Action*, "Social Catholicism", and so on: "The controversies and events that followed ought not to conceal or compromise the fruits of this immensely fertile activity". From 1900 onwards—so Chenu then allows—the historical and philosophical foundations of the Christian faith were brought into question—"from the gospel to ecclesiastical formulations". But this was inevitable: to bring history to bear on Scripture, Christian origins, dogma, and theology, was necessarily to create a crisis—"Despite the dramatic gravity of the situation, it was really a crisis of growth in the Church, and so, for a healthy organism, something absolutely normal". Christian faith, and the theological disciplines, were simply integrating new rational procedures—the sort of shift that had occurred often enough in the past, with the Carolingian renaissance, Abelard's introduction of dialectic, and the discovery of Aristotle. Anybody who had been to school with Thomas Aquinas should have been able to learn the lessons to cope with the crisis. Indeed, according to Chenu's account, his immediate predecessors at Le Saulchoir—above all Ambrose Gardeil—were able to retain a certain serenity throughout the fevered years 1904—1908: "they resisted smart answers and simplistic solutions". But, even in 1937, thirty years after the 'condemnation' of 'Modernism', certain readers would have been wondering by this point exactly who had made 'smart answers'. They must also have been surprised at Chenu's positive account of the place of the errors of 'Modernism' in the history of the 'growth' of the Church. Deeper than that, no doubt, they must have suspected Chenu's insistence on the value of *historical studies* in the interpretation of theology and dogma.

Chenu has always had a caustic and provocative style. Whom had he in mind when he wrote such passages as this: "To deny scientific value to the investigation of laws in order to reserve it for the study of causes is unconsciously to play into the hands of a certain epistemological dualism, in which, to escape from empiricism, one reduces metaphysics to knowledge of pseudo-Platonic archetypes?" In 1985, in a very different culture, we may well scratch our heads over such remarks; but in 1937, with a Dominican training behind one, it would not have been at all difficult to decode them. To let historians into theology would merely be to sink into positivistic erudition; the task of the scholastic theologian was to fix his gaze upon the supratemporal 'causes'. Chenu, by mentioning 'dualism', is, of course, cheekily accusing some of his Dominican brethren of the one thing that all Thomists pride themselves that they have transcended.

Harder words are to come. After lamenting the way in which

Catholic theology was commonly taught at the time (by manuals that potted doctrine in a rationalistic fashion), Chenu goes on to insist that “understanding a text or doctrine is inseparable from knowing the setting in which they originated, for the simple reason that the insight which produced them is encountered in the context, literary, cultural, philosophical, theological, spiritual, in which they took shape”. A genius illuminates his age; the truth that he teaches lasts beyond his age—“But it is the human condition to have mind only in a body, and to express unchangeable truth only in the history where it becomes incarnate”. This must have sounded very ‘Modernist’ to Garrigou-Lagrange’s ears. Worse was to come—in the following sentence: “Christian revelation itself wears human colours according to the epochs in which it has been manifested to us”. And worst of all, to a certain traditional type of Thomist: ‘St. Thomas cannot be expounded entirely by St Thomas himself, and his teaching, however sublime and abstract it may be, is not an absolute, independent of the time in which it was born and of the centuries which nourished it: that is the terrestrial conditioning of the mind, by which historical contingencies and human accident insinuate and inscribe themselves in the most spiritual thinking, and nuance with a discreet relativism the armature of the most coherent and unified systems” (it seems best to keep as close to the French as possible, to suggest something of Chenu’s flavour).

One of Chenu’s practical suggestions is for the student to replace the *Summa Theologiae* in the context of Thomas’ *Quaestiones disputatae*. This would let students into the *movement* of Thomas’s mind and put a stop to treating the *Summa* “comme une pièce toute montée dont la facture monotone et subtile dissimulerait peut-être le dynamisme constructeur”. Once again, how could certain Dominicans have doubted that Chenu was getting at them?

Chenu gets into his stride in the third chapter. The ‘Modernist controversy’ no doubt made the ‘reform of theology’ urgent, but the problems had much deeper roots and involved the entire history of modern theology—“the arrangement of the theological disciplines with which we live today is that of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries—not that of the medieval *Summas*’. From the anti-Protestant and anti-rationalist polemics that had shaped Catholic theology, it was urgent to get back to the sources—“le retour aux sources”. Theology is simply “fides in statu scientiae”. In theology the “word of God” must be allowed to speak. “It is contemplation that gives rise to a theology, not theology that leads to contemplation”. Documentation and speculation, scholarly erudition and metaphysical reasoning, are equally necessary. The “locus” for the theologian is the whole life of the Church, her customs and ideas, devotions and sacraments, spiritualities, institutions,

philosophies—“in accordance with the ample catholicity of the faith, with historical density, and across every culture”. Chenu takes up the theme of “Tradition” from the great Catholic theologians of the early nineteenth century, Moehler and Drey—“With them, it is the abstract intellectualism of the Enlightenment and its indifference towards history that we are rejecting: connected errors, which contaminated neo-Scholasticism”.

In the fourth chapter of his little book Chenu comes out vigorously against the ‘rationalism’ that characterized even the expositions of Thomism. Theodicy was reduced to a set of cosmological proofs—“with no more religious character than the arguments of eighteenth-century Deists”. The ‘intellectualism’ of St Thomas is defended against Bergsonian ‘vitalism’—“as if the *intellectus* of St Thomas was nothing but Taine’s idea of *intelligence*”. The Augustinian ‘sap’ and the ‘mysticism’ of the pseudo-Denis had been allowed to leak out of Aquinas so that he seemed little more than a positivist. We need to be disinfected of this Baroque Scholasticism—“the philosophy of the clerical functionaries at the court of the Emperor Joseph II”. The “Thomist orthodoxy” of Cardinal Zigliara, the greatest of the nineteenth-century Dominican Thomists, is “anyway, contaminated by Wolffianism”. Arcane as these insults must be to most readers nowadays, even in the Dominican Order, these are the phrases that drew blood.

In the fifth and final chapter Chenu returns to the importance of reconstructing the historical context in order to understand a thinker. As far as Aquinas is concerned, it is not over against Descartes or Kant or Einstein that he is to be read—but in the context of Siger, Bonaventure, Averroes and Augustine. The only way of understanding Aquinas is by reconstituting his work in its original setting as far as historical research enables us to do so. “It is good Thomism”, so Chenu concludes, “to do the history of Thomas’s thought—to see its soul united to its body”.

Unfortunately, as Chenu himself has noted, in his article ‘Vérité évangélique et Métaphysique wolfienne à Vatican II’, in *Rev. Sc. Ph. Th.* 57 (1973), the non-historical exposition of the Thomist system survived into the first drafts offered to the bishops in 1962—unfortunately, because, in the rejection of the “Baroque Scholasticism” in these documents and in the new insistence on the priority of Scripture and the Fathers which was the positive side to it, the approach to Aquinas which Chenu has represented all these years also fell into oblivion. But, as Giuseppe Alberigo says in his introductory essay to the new edition of *Une école de théologie: Le Saulchoir*, the little text that was placed on the Index in 1942 may now have come into its own: amid the enthusiasm and the neo-conservatism of the era of Pope John Paul II it may be time to retrieve a classic by an imaginative use of documentation in tandem with speculative reasoning.

* Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Une école de Théologie: le Saulchoir*, Cerf, Paris, 1985. Pp. 178. 72F.