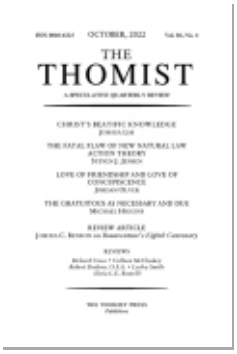
Aquinas, Bonaventure, and the Scholastic Culture of Medieval Paris: Preaching, Prologues, and Biblical Commentary by Randall B. Smith (review)



Lesley Smith

The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review, Volume 86, Number 4, October 2022, pp. 681-684 (Article)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2022.0042*

Aquinas, Bonaventure, and the Scholastic Culture of Medieval Paris: Preaching, Prologues, and Biblical Commentary. By RANDALL B. SMITH. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. x + 452. $99.99 (hardback). ISBN 978-1-1088-4115-3.

At the end of the Introduction to this substantial work, Randall B. Smith admits that he is

> aware that different readers will likely use [this book] in different ways. Some will be interested only in Thomas, others only in Bonaventure. Some may be interested only in the historical and cultural "preliminaries" part, others only in the chapters on the relationship between preaching and biblical commentary in the thirteenth century. Still others may pick up the book simply to read about a particular prologue. So although the chapters are meant to form a coherent whole, I have also done my best to organize the book so that it can be more easily accessed as a reference tool. . . . Although I have tried to keep unnecessary repetition to a minimum, crafting each chapter to be able to stand on its own in this way made some repetition unavoidable. The goal has been to produce a book whose parts are as useful as possible for a wide range of scholars with varied interests in the subjects covered. (21).

This admirable statement nevertheless offers small comfort to the conscientious reviewer, faced with more than 450 larger-format pages in (what appears to be) a rather small, dense font. Smith has produced a heroic work, but how many readers will tackle the whole thing is a matter for doubt. In many ways, that would be a shame, since the piling up of evidence and examples and the sheer volume of medieval prologue material makes for an immersive dive into exegetical practice, especially for those unused to its conventions.

Smith's aim is to emphasize the links between preaching and biblical commentary in the work of thirteenth-century Parisian, Scholastic theologians. He wants medievalists to remember that the university chairs of thirteenth-century theologians were, metaphorically speaking, three-legged stools whose limbs were biblical exegesis, disputation, and (crucially, for Smith) preaching. This triple formulation is taken from twelfth-century scholars such as Peter the Chanter, who describes biblical commentary as the foundations, disputation as the walls, and preaching as the roof of the house of faith which teachers set out to build in their students and themselves. Clearly, Smith is right to recall the importance of this triad, and to remind readers of the place of preaching, especially for members of the mendicant Orders who supply his material here. Whether it was the conventions used in preaching that led the way for developments in disputation and commentary, however, or the influence was another way round, I was not quite so convinced. Indeed, in his conclusion (424) Smith seems rather to backtrack from what I understood to be the assertion of the rest of the book: "I have not drawn conclusions about

causality or lines of influence, preferring rather to restrict my comments to 'habits of mind'." Instead, he shifts to a broader aim, to reclaim a wider definition of "Scholastic," which he thinks has too often been used solely to define the argumentative speculative theology of the Paris schools rather than the more inclusive intellectual culture to which the metaphor of building the house of faith gestures.

The meat of the book is the examination of a group of prologues to a variety of works by Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure. Smith's argument is that there is a link between the form and manner of production of these prologues and the *sermo modernus* style of Parisian preaching. The *sermo modernus* was a break from the older homiletic mode of proceeding in which the preacher went through the day's scriptural passage one phrase or verse at a time. In the "modern sermon" method, the preacher began with a biblical verse apparently unconnected to the day's reading, using it as a kind of thematic introduction to what was to come. The preacher's skill was shown firstly in the choice of this additional text that would illuminate the nonliteral, "spiritual," meanings of the reading of the day, and then in the clarity with which he expounded those meanings. Smith argues that the proficiency acquired in the preparation of *inceptio* and *resumptio* sermons required of all new theological masters at Paris gave them an expertise that they also employed when creating prologues to their various other works, exegetical and thematic. In this way, he claims, the conventions of the new preaching had much wider effects on exegesis. While I agree entirely about the importance of preaching, I was not so sure of the argument about the direction of travel of the influence on show—or indeed, whether there is a single direction of travel at all.

The book is thus divided into three parts: an introduction to the university culture of the second half of the thirteenth century; detailed studies of each of the Aquinas prologues; and detailed studies of each of the Bonaventure prologues. For readers interested in any of these individual works, Smith pulls together a mass of scholarship and translation, together with his own careful exposition of each of them. It has clearly been a labor of love. For the benefit of readers who may wish to know if their own particular field of interest is covered, the works under consideration are as follows:

> For Aquinas: the prologue to *Rigans montes* (Aquinas's *Inceptio* sermon); the prologue to *Hic est liber* (Aquinas's *Resumptio* sermon); the prologues written as a student for his commentaries on Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Isaiah; the prologue to his *Sentences* commentary; the prologue on *Contra impugnantes*; the prologue to his commentary on Boethius, *De Trinitate*; the prologue to his commentary on the Pauline Epistles; the prologue to his commentary on the Psalms; the prologue to the commentary on the Gospel of John.
>
> For Bonaventure: the prologue to *Omnium artifex* (Bonaventure's *Inceptio* sermon); the prologue to his *Resumptio* sermon (an early

version of *De Reductione artium ad theologiam*); the prologue to his *Sentences* commentary; the prologue to the commentary on the Gospel of John; the prologue to the commentary on the Gospel of Luke; the prologue to the *Breviloquium*; the prologue to the *collationes* on the Ten Commandments; the prologue to the *collationes* on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit; the prologue on the *collationes* on the Hexaëmeron.

Smith has written previously on Aquinas's preaching and is steeped in his thought and scholarly approach. His admiration for Aquinas's clarity and method of proceeding is not disguised. Nonetheless, that does not prevent him from appreciating Bonaventure's somewhat different gifts, and indeed from celebrating the great Franciscan's stunning literary talent. Often, devotees of one of these thirteenth-century giants seem to have taken sides against the other, so it is refreshing to see Smith finding himself in enjoyable thrall to Bonaventure's luxuriant language. In fact, Smith's detailed celebration of the Latin made me wonder whether or not Bonaventure was in some degree trapped by his own gifts. His remarkable, (usually) triadic phrase-making, with its alliterations, rhyme and scansion, all of which, as Smith notes, may help readers and hearers remember the theological points that Bonaventure is trying to convey, at times seem to take on a life of their own, beyond the exposition of the text. He is so caught up in the medium that the message can seem somewhat distant or esoteric.

What I missed in this book, lost a little in the mass of detail, was a broader imagination of just how the relationship between biblical commentary and preaching worked—the chicken-and-egg problem of what conclusions were acceptable in exegesis and where they came from. Alan of Lille famously said that Scripture had a wax nose, which could be pulled any which way, once it had been softened up. The exposition of these prologues, and of the *distinctiones* and other teaching and preaching aids called in evidence, exemplifies this in spades. Just where do these interpretations come from, and who decides whether or not they are "right"? Part of the answer to this question is certainly to be found in the importance of form or genre in medieval theological teaching—something often forgotten today: what could be claimed in disputation was not always what could be expounded in the lecture room nor, even more, could be preached from the pulpit. In this way, Smith's insistence on looking at prologues as a particular *form* of medieval theological writing is absolutely correct—and I was only disappointed that the wider question is not ever really discussed here.

My other wish was for a consideration of what sort of religion these sermons, with their multiple three-point structure and their complex language, purveyed, and to whom. What is their relationship to the lists of jokes and proverbs we know were also provided for Franciscan preaching in particular, or the descriptions of the troubadour nature of their communication with a vast variety of audiences and congregations? The material Smith uses here is firmly rooted in modern published sources and, though understandable, that is

unfortunate. It means the book has little or no sense of the original form of these materials, where the unsettled quality and character of manuscript transmission gives a different, more provisional view of medieval academic life. Smith has done scholars a real service in putting these prologues together, to be compared side-by-side. He is right to remind his readers that preaching, disputation and exegesis were all part of a medieval theologian's duty. But preaching to whom, and how, and what—those are questions left for another day.

LESLEY SMITH

Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford
Oxford, United Kingdom

Christian Platonism: A History. Edited by Alexander J. B. Hampton and John Peter Kenney. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. xvi + 497. $130.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-108-59034-1.

It is gratifying to find a volume devoted to Christian Platonism. The validity of this category is sometimes denied, especially with reference to patristic Platonism. In the Introduction, by editors Alexander J. B. Hampton and John Peter Kenney, the Harnackian model of a pure biblical Christianity as opposed to its Hellenization is rightly called into question. The volume is divided into three sections. Section I, "Concepts," contains six chapters, from the perennial value of Platonism to participation. Section II, "History," offers nine chapters that range from the Bible and early Christianity through the Renaissance to modernity. Section III, "Engagements," contains six chapters that study such topics as natural science, the environmental crisis, and art. Of the twenty-four contributors, only three are women. In the interest of space, I must be very selective and cannot refer to my own scholarship in support of my points or agreements/doubts expressed, but they are all buttressed by arguments, either published or in process.

Lloyd Gerson reflects on the perennial value of Platonism—what I would call Platonism as *philosophia perennis*. Gerson rightly notes that patristic Christians who "wanted to reflect philosophically on their religion did so almost exclusively within a Platonic context" (15). Aristotle was received as propaedeutic to Plato. Gerson lists Aristotle as a Platonist (22; see his book, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*). Aquinas Christianized Platonic metaphysics (32). Something similar, I note, happened with the allegedly Aristotelian *Liber de causis*, based on Plotinus and Proclus. Plato's language of Good, One, Being and Nous and beyond Being and Nous, and overflowing, was received by Origen, Nyssen, Dionysius, and others as terms of God. I agree that Plato's