Abstract and Keywords

The centuries covered in this chapter extend from the end of antiquity to the start of the Renaissance; roughly from the sixth century through the fourteenth century. Humanist ideas and ideals making a difference during medieval times have to be understood on their own terms. Christian humanism and humanitarianism upheld the moral worth and dignity of persons, an ideal that grew in significance from the late Middle Ages through the Renaissance and thereafter. Humanist thought attaining a degree of independence from Christian doctrine can be classed into four main categories: the human ability to reason without following religion; the human competence to understand the world without religion; the human aptitude for virtue and morality without religion; and the human facility for political organization without religion.

Keywords: Aristotle, Cicero, Stoicism, natural philosophy, theology, science, church and state

The Renaissance era has the reputation for rediscovering the classical world and fostering humanism in the West. The term “Renaissance Humanism” is so familiar that placing humanism during the long medieval period seems precluded. The kinds of humanism, primarily literary, artistic, and cultural in focus, that emerged during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had their own characteristic features and interests. Looking for precursors and parallels in the eleventh, twelfth, or thirteenth centuries may be productive, but only after those centuries are appreciated in their own right.¹ Writers of the early Middle Ages, and the late Middle Ages (after around 1050), accessed and interpreted the heritage of classical Greek, Hellenic, and Roman thought in distinctive ways according to the different needs of their times. Episodic revivals of humanist themes from antiquity, and innovative philosophical ideas furthering humanism, played a powerful role in Medieval cultural and intellectual life.²

There is little point to looking for modern secular humanism anywhere in the medieval world. Atheism, or even agnosticism, is difficult to discern. Outspoken heretical dissents from religious doctrine are not infrequent during the Middle Ages, yet such disputes occur among Christians, or among Muslims. Explicit blasphemous dismissals of God and
scripture are very infrequent, and almost non-existent among the literate and educated. Another modern feature of humanism, the claim that no moral instruction from religion is needed, could not securely raise its head (at the risk of beheading) during this period.

Humanist ideas and ideals making a difference during medieval times have to be understood on their own terms. Christian humanism and humanitarianism upheld the moral worth and dignity of human beings as persons, a profound ideal growing in significance in Europe from the late Middle Ages through the Renaissance and thereafter. Humanist thought attaining a degree of independence from Christian doctrine can be classed into four main categories: the human ability to reason without following religion; the human competence to understand the world without religion; the human aptitude for virtue and morality without religion; and the human facility for political organization without religion.

The centuries covered in this chapter extend from late antiquity to the start of the Renaissance; roughly from the fifth century through the fourteenth century. The year 529 CE could be a convenient start, when Emperor Justinian decreed the closing of all philosophical schools, and only those teaching the orthodoxies of Christianity could keep their profession. Pagan literature and worldviews were widely suppressed and eliminated, but the Empire was vast. Neo-Platonic and Jewish thinkers continued to flourish. Byzantine academies of Constantinople and Antioch expanded in size and influence in later centuries, and Muslim schools of philosophy and theology also attained their heights.

**Christian Humanism and Humanitarianism**

The Greek ideal of humanist learning, enlarged and elaborated by Cicero (106–43 BCE) and Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE), aimed at the intellectual and character formation of the soul, for the individual and communal good. That Stoic devotion to social unification, exemplified in the *logos* of guiding mentality throughout the world, naturally extended to all humanity. To the extent that humans guide their conduct in concert with *logos*, and hence in cooperation with others, they are virtuously oriented to community and the social good, while fulfilling their individual lives. Until the Renaissance revival of this Stoic humanism by scholars translating the Roman stoics directly into their own times and troubles, that humanistic ideal was partially adopted and perpetuated through early Christian Fathers and later medieval theologians.

Christianity proclaims that the supreme purpose of human life is achieving spiritual union with God. The complete dependence of human beings upon God does not mean that God does everything. The cultivation of loving and virtuous relationships among each other and with God allows humans to participate in divine redemption. Early Christian theology discerned *logos*, suitably perfected, in Jesus as both God and Man, allowing parallels to be drawn with selected features of Stoicism and Greek philosophy. Modes of divine activity in and with the world, and within the human soul, are the subject of deliberation and contentious debate among theologians across the centuries, including the Middle Ages. However those debates proceeded, the participation of humanity in divinity could never
be just a topic for scriptural exegesis or metaphysical speculation. What is good for humanity, the goodness of humanity, and what is right for human beings, remained essential.

Christian ethical humanism upholds the inherent moral worth and dignity of each human being. In the political sphere, violations of that status should be prevented by statutes enacting human rights. Christian humanitarianism respects that inherent human value through charitable activities protecting people from vulnerability, suffering, and degradation. Humanity was created by God in the divine image and redeemed by Jesus who became human. Each person is intended for deification and possesses the intrinsic dignity of that high status. That status could be factual enough, but not necessarily motivational. Love is the primary motivation, and freely acting from love displays respect for others. God’s love is the reason for humanity’s deification, and hence the fulfillment of that deification is through loving relationships. The Stoic unification of common reason and common caring embodied within all humanity found its religious counterpart in the Christian deification intended for all humanity. The Incarnation of God in mankind, and humanity’s nature striving towards God, is a relationship not only for one’s own salvation and afterlife, but also about people living the religious life in worldly communion.

At the outset of the Middle Ages, Boethius (c. 480–524) had identified the rational nature of humanity as the defining feature of persons. The great theologian of the High Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), exemplified that account of the *imago Dei* in a manner characteristic of the Latin West. For Aquinas, human dignity is primarily due to the intellect, which distinguishes humans from all other creatures, so individual beings having a rational nature are to be denoted “persons.” Bernard of Clairvaux (c. 1090–1153) picked out free will as the basis for human dignity, and Aquinas agreed that rational action is freely independent. The capacities for self-knowledge and free choice remain essential for that moral status of personhood, possessed by each individual.5 That medieval consensus was passed on to Renaissance thinkers who developed conceptions of individual autonomy for advancing economic, legal, and political agendas.

During the Middle Ages, the supreme value of persons only gradually infused social and political thought, which was then dominated by natural law theory and a hierarchical ordering of social strata. Relief from starvation-level poverty, especially during times of famine, was a community duty, and the wealthy were charged with the obligation to contribute to charitable relief. Another strand of humanitarian law in Europe traces back to medieval just war theory and prohibitions against harms to noncombatants.6 Some priestly orders, such as the Franciscans, directly ministered to the poor. Where more than biblical injunction and the example of Jesus was needed to justify charity, theologians of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries typically adapted an Aristotelian view of virtue to align with spiritual aims. Aquinas, for example, paired charitable giving “to visit, to quench, to feed, to ransom, clothe, harbor or bury” with religious fellowship “to counsel, reprove, console, to pardon, forbear, and to pray.”7
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In the East, Basil the Great (c. 329–379), one of the Cappadocian Fathers along with Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, was a Byzantine Patriarch recognized by both the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. His most impressive accomplishment while Bishop of Caeserea was the establishment of the Basiliad, a large complex of buildings providing shelter, food, medical care, and reform ministries to all in need. This Christian hospitality and philanthropy (philo-anthropos, love for humanity) was a paradigm propelling the institution known thereafter as the hospital. This humanitarian enactment of love for others put into action Basil’s canonical view of the Trinity expressed in the Nicene Creed.\(^8\) In his words, “The unity of God lies in the communion (koinonia) of the Godhead.”\(^9\) For Basil, and other Orthodox theologians and mystics in later centuries, the individuality (hypostasis) of each Person-in-One is about a unity that is intrinsically relational—not substantial as a metaphysical abstraction, but experiential in a personalist realization.\(^10\) The Orthodox tradition has continued to support humanitarianism and its own approach to the defense of human rights.\(^11\)

This Eastern Orthodox view of relational personhood is a counter-balance to the Latin Western stress on subjectivity and autonomy, by emphasizing attentiveness to others in reciprocal bonds of caring, where each develops as a person. Experiential loving, through caring service, prayerful meditation, or even mystical illumination, cannot be secondary after intellectual knowing. Gregory Palamas (c. 1296–1359) synthesized the mystical tradition of Orthodoxy, represented for example by Symeon the New Theologian, with a Trinitarian theology about human access to, and unifying participation in, divine energies from God’s communion with creation.\(^12\) The process of deification, for Palamas, is a practice of loving:

One will practice the corresponding virtues with the aid of the passionate part of the soul which will act in conformity with the end that God proposes on creating it. ... [One will] arrive at possessing a divine disposition and make it progress towards a still better possession, which is the love of God. By this love he accomplishes the commandments given to someone who is loved, by which he learns, he puts into practice and acquires the love pure and perfect for his neighbour.\(^13\)

An analogy between the loving God in tri-personal unity and humanity united through mutual love among persons lasted as a ideal of spiritual and moral growth for Eastern Orthodox countries. For example, the Russian term Sobornost—denoting “universal” or “catholic” in Russian orthodoxy, but impossible to simply define—can illustrate that humanist ideal of a unified community of interrelated persons.\(^14\)

Reason and Religion

Aquinas at most exemplified Christian humanism, but his position at the University of Paris situated him in the middle of controversies over trends towards Philosophical humanism.\(^15\) His devotion to both Christian doctrine and Aristotelian thought shifted the di-
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rection of Western civilization. Both the compromises he forged and the currents he resisted enlarged scholasticism’s horizons and swelled the tide of later humanism.

Aquinas would probably have never joined the University of Paris faculty, or studied Aristotelian writings so thoroughly, if he had been able to pursue his academic studies as planned. A pope and an emperor permanently altered his destiny. The Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino, not far from his family’s home near Naples, was providing his basic education until he had to depart at the age of fourteen in 1239. To his good fortune, the alternative was the University of Naples, where he was able to read some key texts of Aristotle, writings then forbidden at Paris and under suspicion elsewhere across Europe. For the rest of his career, there was hardly anything about Aristotle that Aquinas couldn’t access or absorb if a text appeared anywhere within the reach of Europeans.

This was a time when the boundaries between orthodoxy, heresy, and blasphemy were fluid and hazardous. Aquinas’s own theology fell under suspicion and occasional edict, or imitated and elevated to dogma, as decades and centuries passed. The thirteenth century was particularly unstable, theologically and politically. The year 1233 marked the beginning of the Inquisition when Pope Gregory IX centralized inquisitions into heresy within the Church hierarchy. During Aquinas’s childhood, the heated and often violent struggle between Pope Gregory IX and Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II was altering the face of Europe. That conflict reached the Abbey where Aquinas was still a student. After the pope excommunicated the emperor in March 1239 in the course of resisting Frederick’s armies dominating regions of Italy, Monte Cassino was occupied by troops and the Abbey had to disband. By the fall, as Aquinas joined the students at the university in Naples, every monastic and academic center had heard about the pope’s July encyclical condemning Frederick in the harshest terms. This was no longer about territory or politics; Pope Gregory IX made it about terrible heresy and blasphemy against Christianity:

This pestilent king ... has notably and openly stated that—in his own words—the whole world has been fooled by three impostors, Jesus Christ, Moses, and Muhammad, two of whom died honorably, while Jesus himself died on the Cross. Moreover, he has dared to affirm, or rather, he has fraudulently claimed, that all those who believed that a virgin could give birth to the God who created nature, and all the rest, were fools. And Frederick has aggravated the heresy by this insane assertion, according to which no one can be born without having been conceived by the prior intercourse of a man and a woman; he also claims that people ought to believe nothing that cannot be proven by the strength and reason of nature.16

The pope rightly assumed that such accusations represented the worst ways to commit apostasy and atheism. No Christian would deny Christ’s miraculous birth and divinity, and only an atheist believes nothing more than what human reason understands.

These open accusations shocked Christian ears. Among academics, many were already prepared to view Frederick as a heretic, or at least a threat to orthodoxy, due to his abiding interest in non-Christian philosophy and theology. He surrounded himself with scholars familiar with the writings of Aristotle, the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd (Latinized as
Averroes), the Jewish philosopher Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides), and other Greek-inspired thinkers such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Sinā (Avicenna). Academic centers across Frederick’s empire, such as Naples (founded by Frederick fifteen years earlier), could access a growing body of Latin translations from Greek and Arabic. Frederick even played the role of inquisitive philosopher himself, framing questions about philosophical and theological matters for transmission through diplomats to Muslim and Jewish sages.17

Michael Scot, a respected scholar in the service of Frederick’s court, was among the first European translators of Aristotle and Averroes during 1210s–1230s. Not coincidentally, these surprising works of natural philosophy and metaphysics were promptly banned by the Church. Scot was undaunted. Acquiring a reputation for heretical views, such as asserting the eternity of the world (denying divine creation) and the superiority of philosophical explanations (doubting Biblical revelation), Scot was portrayed as a co-conspirator with Frederick for promulgating the “Three Impostors” attack on all religion. Little originality could be attributed to them. Discrediting any of the three religions can start with claiming that the founder—Moses, Jesus, or Mohammad—were fraudulent men fooling gullible masses. Certain writers among all three religions, going back centuries, had targeted other religions with such claims. Accusing Frederick of believing that all three religions were just vast frauds was an efficient and effective way of calling him an atheist. An association with a pagan philosophy, especially Aristotle’s, was also sufficient to raise alarms about incipient atheism.

The legacy of pagan Greek philosophy, excepting certain aspects already incorporated into Roman Catholicism by Church Fathers, still presented a dangerous threat to Christian orthodoxy. Pope Gregory IX played upon those fears, with deft timing. The very idea of doubting salvation, immortality, miracles, revelation, and creation was precisely the kind of provocation to disturb the thirteenth century intellectual world to a degree impossible in earlier centuries. What had been unthinkable had become at least imaginable, and for some strong minds, even ponderable and debatable. That difference was evidently due, directly or indirectly, to Aristotle. Aquinas became well-prepared for those debates.

While he was at Naples, the Dominicans captured the attention of young Aquinas, and within a few years he was a valued member of a highly academic and mobile order of priests. In 1248 he was sent to the new Dominican university at Cologne, where he did advanced studies under Albert the Great, the leading scholar of Aristotelianism. Albert then sent him to Paris in 1252 to complete his theological education, and he joined the faculty in 1256. By that time, the university required the philosophical study of all of Aristotle’s available texts from logic and metaphysics to ethics. What was primarily philosophical consisted of Aristotle’s writings and commentaries on Aristotle, which were taught but not endorsed by Catholic professors who knew where pagan philosophy stopped and correct theological interpretations began. If a professor endorsed an Aristotelian position unapproved by theology, such as an unfiltered proposition from Averroes, he risked destroying his career.
Before Aquinas’s death in 1274, his commentaries on Aristotle and other Aristotelian thinkers, along with the major works *Summa contra Gentiles* and *Summa theologiae*, had largely framed the manner in which philosophical and theological disputes should be conducted. Any sensitive doctrinal issue or metaphysical point, no matter how central to Christian dogma, receives a thorough examination from both sides of a question. This reflected the disputatious training received by university students trained in logic, as well as the determination of Aquinas to debate his position with the best arguments for the other side. With a frankness that became rarer in later centuries, Aquinas openly stated and explained heretical and even atheist views that he contradicted. His works effectively supplied a compendium of non-Christian and irreligious opinions and arguments.

Perhaps as importantly, Aquinas believed that philosophy by itself could not determine the correct answer to certain questions, such as whether the world had a beginning or it is eternal, or whether God-in-Three-Persons is a coherent idea. Despite the theological convenience of letting faith in revelation supply its answers, this allowance for philosophy’s limitations and agnosticism’s reasonableness was an important precedent for later thought. Aquinas did expect philosophical reasoning to demonstrate the reality of a supernatural creator. However, he also held that God’s essential nature is unknowable, atheism is thinkable (though wrong), and arguments for God are at least debatable.  

After Aquinas’s death, philosopher William of Ockham (c. 1280–1349) took the extreme stand on philosophy’s limitations by rejecting all arguments for God as failures. His nominalism and empiricism rejected universal essences, so our minds only know concepts formed from noting similarities among things. Simpler hypotheses with enough empirical support are preferable explanations over ambitious hypotheses about excessive and unprovable realities. This “Razor” eliminates most metaphysical speculations then popular in Scholasticism, and modern empiricists such as David Hume and Bertrand Russell defended skepticism towards God by applying Ockham’s razor. He staunchly defended the philosophy’s independence: “Assertions ... concerning natural philosophy, which do not pertain to theology, should not be solemnly condemned or forbidden to anyone, since in such matters everyone should be free to say freely whatever he pleases.”

The section on politics discusses Ockham’s separation of church and state.

**Understanding the World without Religion**

For most of the Middle Ages, disputing Biblical miracles was hardly part of any intellectual’s scholarly plans. One outstanding exception is the seventh century work titled *De Mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae* by the self-styled “Augustinus Hibernicus” or the Irish Augustine. His guide was St. Augustine, who viewed a miracle as God’s enactment of something nature can do, in an unusual or fast manner. The Irish Augustine went further in the direction of rationalism by asserting that any miracle must have some corresponding natural capacity that allows the miracle to occur at all. No natural capacity, no miracle—and God cannot compel an entirely unnatural event to occur. That places reasonable
limits on God’s power and will. Although nature was God’s creation so any needed miracles would be among divine preparations, human reason cannot and should not be left mystified. Expecting knowledge of nature to help account for miracles, and requiring the compatibility of reasonable knowledge with religious revelation, was a bold philosophical and theological proposal. *De Mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae* left little impression on medieval thought beyond the next century, although Alcuin of York was familiar with its theses.\(^\text{20}\)

William of Conches (c. 1090–1155), who was associated with the remarkable School of Chartres, represents the beginnings of what may be labeled as philosophical humanism. Respect for the dignity and achievements of the human intellect took the form of examining and disseminating as much of the legacy of Greek philosophy and science as could be found after five hundred years of neglect and decay. In Europe, attention to non-Christian thought characterized this humanism, especially the study of Islamic science and philosophy, which was already digesting Greek texts. William of Conches was among the earliest to read and cite Muslim sources.\(^\text{21}\) His speculations forging a unified account of creation from Genesis and Plato’s *Timaeus* left literal words of the Bible in doubt, so he argued that Biblical passages must be read figuratively, since the Bible was not about natural philosophy.\(^\text{22}\) One of the rare medieval endorsements of atomism occurs in another treatise, although William denies that this world of atoms has always existed, since God had to make them and set them into motion.\(^\text{23}\)

By the thirteenth century, another resurgence of interest in Greek philosophy had revised the question of reconciling reason and faith. The theological presumption that worthy philosophy could never disagree with Christianity was put to the test. Once again, the key question was whether human reason could be the equal, or even superior, to revelation.

In the early 1300s, David of Dinant (c. 1160–1220) stood as the ignominious example of a heretical thinker who disregarded orthodoxy and followed philosophy. He upheld the worldview of pantheism, uniting the world with God. His main influences were probably the neo-Platonism of John Scotus Eriugena and the Jewish philosopher Ben Gebirol (Avicebron). After his condemnation, his works were destroyed and only refutations from Aquinas and others have preserved his views.

The availability by the early 1230s of a Latin translation of a work by Maimonides (c. 1135–1204), the *Dux dubitantium*, set much of the agenda for reconciling philosophy and religion. For Maimonides, there is no point to philosophical arguments trying to prove that the world must have come into being from nothing by God’s creative act. No amount of knowledge about the existing world as it is could serve as sufficient premises for demonstrating whether the world had a beginning or not, or how any kind of beginning could have occurred. Although philosophy is independent from religion, philosophy and theology are compatible because human reason lacks the capacity to attain knowledge capable of contradicting faith.
Philosophical arguments for the world’s eternity, and natural explanations to replace miracles, were disputed widely during the late Middle Ages. The two issues are connected. If the world is eternal, the need for a supernatural creator is far less obvious, and arguments from the world’s contingency cannot get started. No need for God, so no need for miracles; and arguing for God from miracles is futile. A contingent world could be otherwise than it actually is, so the creator could have made it differently, and can continue to cause changes (such as miracles). On the other hand, if the world’s existence is in some sense necessary, then the world’s order and structure would be necessary (for nothing beyond the world could make it different), and miraculous violations of that order cannot occur. Perhaps it is conceivable that an eternal God made a beginningless world, by distinguishing God’s timelessness from the world’s infinite temporal duration. All the same, this world would then in some sense be necessary, and divine interventions (miracles) caused at various times could not occur.

That fine distinction between an eternal God and a world without a beginning was usually overlooked or ignored by Christian theologians. A world that needed no beginning could not sound at all like the world created in six days according to Genesis in the Bible. Aristotle was widely read as the Greek philosopher who most clearly defended the eternity of the world. The commentaries on Aristotle by Avicenna (c. 980–1037) and Averroes (c. 1126–1198) supported that interpretation, and they reinforced it with further metaphysical arguments. Taken together, these three thinkers represented the greatest philosophical challenge to Christian theology and its dogmas about divine creation from nothing and miraculous events. If the conclusions of metaphysical philosophy, along with natural philosophy’s explanations of things in the world, could satisfy the human intellect, then religion has less and less to explain.

Avicenna’s metaphysics allows for the dependency of the eternal world on a necessary being (God). However, this necessary being accomplishes everything necessarily, according to Avicenna, so the world could not have been otherwise than it is. God’s will therefore never changes, and speaking of God’s freedom to will otherwise (such as altering decisions and plans) makes no sense. That inflexibility does not seem like free will, and Christian thinkers resisted such a conclusion. Averroes similarly defended the eternity of the world and the unchangeability of God’s will. Aquinas weighed their arguments and judged that philosophy lends support to the world’s eternity, without yielding a conclusive demonstration. However, philosophers had to measure their words very carefully where theological dogmas had to prevail. Condemnations of Aristotelian-inspired theses and Averroist views were announced during the 1270s at Paris, setting the agenda for the rest of Europe. Only the towering intellect of an Aquinas could evade the direct charge of heresy. Any academic during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries who endorsed Avicenna or Averroes, or echoed their views on controversial topics, usually became targets of suspicious for heresy or atheism.

The better-known figures targeted for scrutiny during the thirteenth century were Siger of Brabant and Boethius (or Boetius) of Dacia. As members of the faculty of Arts in the University of Paris during the 1260s and 1270s, they were not responsible for teaching
theology, but they drew critical attention for defending philosophy too vigorously. Their teaching of Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroes was little tempered by the interpretative limits set by Aquinas and similarly orthodox theologians. Such academic independence, in the eyes of many, amounted to the stance that philosophy’s reasonings reach knowable conclusions able to contradict propositions of knowledge acquired from faith. Siger even dared to permit doubts about the immortality of the individual soul and the resurrection of the dead, with a skepticism characteristic of Averroes. In his published writings, Siger backed away from direct confrontation by adopting views closer to Aquinas, but without sufficient haste, because he was targeted by condemnations in 1270 and 1277 and the Inquisition drove him from Paris.

Boetius is credited with the work *De aeternitate mundi*, which does fit well with his reputation for admiring Avicenna and Averroes, and for elevating philosophy to the level of theology. With greater clarity than other scholastics of that period, this work expressly awards to philosophy (both metaphysics and natural philosophy, or science) the capacity and responsibility to understand the natural world, while theology follows its own understanding of revelation. Despite the way that Boetius in all of his works repeats his sincere view that reason has no right to contradict revelation, he also insists that philosophy must be the sole guide to the natural world, and revelation only properly deals with supernatural matters, such as the creation of the world. Faith is not science. This conciliatory demarcation between natural knowledge and belief in revelation was widely regarded as a dramatic confrontation with theology, and a challenge to theology’s supremacy over all human knowledge. The theologians did not threaten him with inquisition, but he soon departed Paris as well.

Three additional figures, also associated with the University of Paris, illustrate how natural philosophy was gaining momentum during the period of 1250 to 1350. Roger Bacon (c. 1215–1292) took a strongly Aristotelian stand on collecting empirical facts from experiments before forming theories. Observations made with measurements are essential, and mathematical relationships among phenomena guide the intellect towards correct explanations. Not until the time of Isaac Newton, four hundred years later, would the centrality of mathematics to physical science be fully appreciated. Bacon expected theology to understand and incorporate natural philosophy, but he had little hope for mutual comprehension, encountering only obstruction or neglect as years and decades passed. His 1271 tract *Compendium Studii Philosophiae* was replete with diatribes against rampant corruption and ignorance throughout the Church.

Rebellion against Aristotle, and much of philosophy, was still thinkable during the thirteenth century, although exemplars are scarce. Nicholas of Autrecourt (c. 1300–1368) was practically the lone philosopher taking materialism seriously during his times. His atoms are substantial (more than mathematical points) and compose everything in the world. However, in the course of reinterpreting Aristotle, scorning metaphysics (and much of theology), and adopting epistemic skepticism toward knowledge in general, Nicholas had no way to explain how he upheld Church doctrines such as transubstantiation.
Jean Buridan (c. 1300–1360) rejected atomism on Aristotelian grounds without uncritically accepting Aristotelian physics. Buridan is positioned near the end of the Medieval era, only a couple of generations before the epicenter of philosophy’s impact would transfer to northern Italian universities, such as Padua, at the outset of the Renaissance. As a philosophy professor at Paris, he avoided entanglements with disputes over doctrinal creeds, and he navigated controversies by keeping strictly separate the methods of philosophy from theology. Theology starts from dogmatic faith and unsurprisingly reaches different views about God and creation than philosophy, which only uses reason and the senses. By the 1340s, this compromise kept the peace, and it provided natural philosophy with considerable latitude within and outside universities. Indeed, roles were becoming somewhat reversed, for the thirteenth century battle over how much Aristotelian thought could be absorbed into theology was gradually replaced by the fourteenth and fifteenth century contest over how much Aristotelianism could be overturned by empirical science despite theological reservations. Buridan himself tried to replace Aristotle’s theory of motion. His hypothesis said that a projectile put into motion by a force continues to go in the same direction because of the amount of impetus given to it. The precedent for that hypothesis appears in a commentary on Aristotle by John Philoponus (c. 490–570), who had been among the first medieval thinkers to creatively combine both Aristotle and Plato with Christianity.

Morality without Religion

Stoicism was the only non-Christian ethics widely available to European thinkers after the Roman Empire collapsed. Until a portion of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* was translated in the late twelfth century, the ethics of Cicero (especially *On Duties* and the rhetoric in *On Invention*) and Seneca yielded an account of the good life and the virtues. Augustine (fourth century) found many Stoic virtues to be commendable, particularly the four “cardinal” virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. However, he had to reject the Stoic view that being virtuous is its own reward. Christian theologians thereafter agreed that human virtue could not be an end in itself, but at most conducive to the religious life, a life made truly virtuous (in faith, hope, and charity) only through God.30 Besides the Stoics, commonly cited sources for medieval thinkers were Macrobius (fifth century) and Boethius (sixth century). Macrobius’s *Commentary on Cicero’s Dream of Scipio* transmitted a Neo-Platonic ethics, and Boethius’s *De Consolatione Philosophiae* contained several elements of Greek ethics.

With the revival of learning in the twelfth century, additional Romans were added to the pantheon of pagan authors offering moral wisdom, such as Horace, Ovid, and Virgil. Peter Abelard (c. 1079–1142) of the cathedral school of Notre-Dame de Paris composed an *Ethics* centered on the sinfulness of an act’s intent in violation of God’s will. His *Collationes* (a *Dialogue* between a Philosopher and a Jew and a Christian) more interestingly
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allows the pagan philosopher to depict virtue as sufficient for happiness in this life, despite capitulating to the Christian’s point that an afterlife is the supreme good for humanity. That distinction between natural goodness and divine goodness allowed medieval theologians to reconcile moral philosophy with moral theology. The virtuous life attainable through human effort is conducive to worldly ends, which are good for the individual as well as the community.

Alan of Lille (c. 1120–1203), a master at the University of Paris, kept philosophy and practical ethics at a distance from theology. His *Anticlaudianus* poetically fashions the “New Man” possessing all perfections from the conjoining of Nature’s virtues acquired through the liberal arts and God’s bestowal of his soul. As the New Man victoriously establishes the best government, only the natural virtues are relied upon, lending the impression that nothing divine need be involved.

Restraining philosophers from teaching that the virtues are not just essential for worldly happiness, but practically sufficient for humanity’s supreme good, was an even more urgent issue after the entire *Nicomachean Ethics* was translated into Latin by Robert Grosseteste (c. 1175–1253) in the late 1240s. Following the example of commentaries by Albert the Great (c. 1200–1280) and Thomas Aquinas, theologians typically argued that the study and practice of the liberal and practical virtues, while conducive to the general welfare of society, had to be supplemented by God’s commands and attuned to the ultimate good of supernatural grace and salvation.

Only the staunchest Aristotelians defied that theological supervision. The notorious example was Boetius of Dacia. His *De summo bono* (On the Highest Good, or On the Life of the Philosopher), written during the early 1270s, promoted philosophy to theology’s level by crediting the contemplative life with leading to the right kind of human life and the greatest good achievable in this life. Boetius does not deny that God and faith is necessary for eternal perfection, but this devout belief must be compatible with the philosopher’s intellectual quest for earthly goodness.

Politics without Religion

Among non-Christian thinkers, the role of Cicero’s Stoicism in the development of medieval politics and political philosophy was unrivalled until the mid-thirteenth century by Aristotle’s view of the human being as a political animal in *Politics*. John of Salisbury (c. 1120–1180), bishop of Chartres, wrote the first full-length treatise on politics since antiquity, *Policraticus, sive de nugis curialium et vestigiis philosophorum*. Aligned with Cicero, and akin to Alan of Lille’s reliance on nature and natural virtues, John of Salisbury finds the foundations of the political order in human speech and reason, which, through humanistic education, allow people to institute justice in cooperative communities. He assumes that kingship is the typical and stable form of government. His Neoplatonic analogy between the body’s organs and the parts of society allows him to assign kingly responsibilities for the welfare of the whole. No authority has the right to impose arbitrary will.
A selfish tyrant may rule by God’s will, but tyrannicide is entirely justifiable from the public standpoint.\textsuperscript{36}

Giles of Rome (c. 1240–1316) was the archbishop of Bourges and the author of \textit{De Regimine Principum} (On the Government of Princes), which was perhaps the most secular work on political theory in Europe since the Romans. Although Giles usually imitated Aquinas in his other works where Papal authority prevails, here Aristotle takes center stage and the government is an entirely worldly institution. The king’s unique role is to reasonably harmonize the civil law with natural law, ensuring that peace and justice prevail for the good of the people.\textsuperscript{37}

William of Ockham similarly justified absolute monarchy in the form of the supremely just ruler solely capable of protecting all subjects. Unlike Aquinas and his predecessors, Ockham advanced a radical view of human free will capable of refusing anything, even God, so no sort of coercive law automatically obligates persons. Later Renaissance theorists enlarged that conception of natural freedom inherent to each individual. For Ockham, a political authority must be capable of rationally justifying its rule to any and all citizens, and the people have an extraordinary right to overthrow terrible despots. A \textit{Short Discourse on the Tyrannical Government over Things Divine and Human} additionally argued that the people do not have to suffer any tyranny from a pope interfering in political affairs, and the Church should only be concerned with the spiritual life.\textsuperscript{38}

Marsilius of Padua (c. 1280–1343) outlined a wider separation between church and state in \textit{Defensor pacis} (The Defender of Peace). The Church has no claim to worldly power. A pope is just an appointed leader of a humanly created institution, canon law lacks any legally binding status, and citizens can ignore attempts at clerical interference in civic matters. The approval of the body of citizens (\textit{universitas civium}) is the basis for government authority, and free citizens can acclaim and depose their rulers. As Marsilius assumed that a legitimate monarchy could meet these standards, his political theory is not a kind of republicanism that would be designed by early modern theorists. Nevertheless, quite secular and humanist grounds for justifying legitimate government are decisive in Marsilius’s influential work.\textsuperscript{39}

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