

## The Social Teaching of Aquinas

By W. L. Bevan

Historical investigation has within it something of the element of adventure; in a real sense the historian takes his life in his hands, for before his labours are ended he may find that many firmly imbedded assumptions must be cast aside. An eminent historical teacher of Oxford, now the head of Balliol College, Mr. A. L. Smith, spoke a few years ago of the difficulty of dealing through the force of argument or fact with "persons shielded from the painful impact of new ideas by the proof armour of sectarian prejudice." It often happens that the work of the historical investigator, when it comes to popularizing or making accessible the results of his voyage of discovery through the complicated mazes of civilizations, is even more difficult and more uncertain of attaining its results than the actual pioneer work already accomplished by expert hands.

The mediaeval period of history has not yet been completely emancipated from partisan control and recrimination. We are often told still that these ages which were familiarly and condescendingly called "dark" can only be valued if they are regarded as a wearisome lapse of time preparatory to the revolution of the sixteenth century which by another "parti pris" has been perhaps conveniently but not accurately called the Reformation.

Clearing out nuisances may sometimes have to be accomplished by drastic methods, and destruction if followed by construction may plead some arguments in justification; but when one looks at Western civilization today, one must allow that "The Reformation" is still to come. If one is prepared

to clear away the debris of partisan prejudice it is possible to look at the history of the Middle Ages as a great architectonic achievement, the most surprising that ever took place. There was the miracle of the mediaeval melting-pot, only there was no head cook to dictate the ingredients and criticize the resulting compound. And yet the mediaeval melting-pot produced great art, great architecture, great organization, great thinkers, and great saints.

While so many of the aspects of mediaeval life are drawing sympathetic attention, as witnessed by such work as that done by M. Paul Sabatier on the Franciscan movement and by M. Luchaire on the life and pontificate of Innocent III., it is interesting to note that the phases of mediaeval thought, so difficult of approach because of their alien method of presentation, are being made the subject of close and appreciative study. One is familiar with the Neo-scholastic movement in France and Belgium with the primary position assigned to Thomas Aquinas as a normative thinker. It is a matter less well known that one of the professors of the Sorbonne, M. Picavet, now alas lost to learning, emphasized the necessity of investigating along independent lines the historical development of mediaeval philosophy. The bibliography prefixed to one of his latest books offers a surprising proof of the general interest in the great thinkers of the Middle Ages. Pages of numerous works from all sources will be found here. A Spaniard, Menendez y Pelayo, finds himself associated with a German, Seeberg, in the field of mediaeval philosophical investigation. A scholar of Semitic stock, Joffé, is one of the leading authorities on the records of the Papacy and one of the most illuminating books on Thomas Aquinas comes from the hands of Professor Eucken.

Mediaeval thought was concentrated upon theology. This



was natural, because it was through the Church that a new state of society was replacing the chaos of barbarian tribal conditions. There was a feeling that the Divine Law had within it an answer to all social needs, or to put it in another way, that society would attain its true end so far as it was faithful to the Divine Law. The recognition of this principle gave a wide scope to mediaeval speculation. It attacked fearlessly many problems that are now handed over to special discussion. It embarked upon the discussion of new facts simply because the whole life of humanity was regarded as being under the protection and leadership of the Church.

Social speculation and observation of social facts were alike disregarded in the literature produced in the period between the downfall of Roman civilization in Western Europe and the age which brought about a social rebirth, which was years before the term Renaissance is applied in historical literature. The status of society was simple, economically considered, though this would seem nothing short of a paradox, on account of the complex problems of law and government which seem to belong to the feudal regime. Commerce was conducted on a limited scale; the use of money in exchange was reduced to extremely narrow proportions. The taking of interest was forbidden by the rules of the Church. It is easy to see how these factors limited the field of the study of social problems.

Before the great age of scholasticism, even in the works of such progressive thinkers as Scotus Erigena and Abelard, the consideration of phenomena pertaining to the social fabric was passed over as if they had no real place in philosophic speculation or discussion. The friend of Thomas a Becket, John of Salisbury, who did not hesitate to adopt the dialectical method in his writings, confines himself in his *Policraticus* to a few superficial observations on the dangers of luxury.



A new current is manifested in the century which produced the greatest of all mediaeval Popes, Innocent III., the man who united the qualities of Augustus and Justinian, to whose colossal industry no detail of the European social order was unimportant, no department of life beyond the concern of the head and arbiter of the Christian commonwealth. Society was moulding itself along novel lines. National feeling was taking the place of tribal instincts. The solidarity of Christendom took form in the crusading movements. Trade, international in its expansion through the great trading centres of the Italian peninsula, was making mighty strides. Capital was being accumulated, and its relations to morals and religion could not escape the notice of the alert schools of teachers and commentators whose names are so closely associated with the upgrowth of university life among all the peoples of Western Christendom.

In the most unexpected way, in a way unlooked for by the founders of the mendicant orders, and especially regarded by Francis of Assisi as a sign of secularism, the new orders soon plunged into a program of education which in its democratic appeal went far beyond anything the ancient Church had seen either at Alexandria or Antioch.

It is time to throw aside partisan names and question-begging labels and recognize once for all that the social program of the mediaeval Church was legitimate in its ambitions and inspiring in its outlook. A selected group, Christianity trying to bring perfection on a microscopic scale to a coterie of adherents, was not the ideal of the age of Thomas Aquinas and Dante. The fictions of compartmental religion were not yet welcomed. It took years of revolution and generations of small minds to reduce the cultural content of the Christian tradition to the dimensions and regularity of a thin stream of sand trickling through an hour-glass.

There was no hesitation in hewing out new roads in unfamiliar territory shown by the leaders of this educational campaign; its vital energies cannot be concealed by its rigid terminology or by its antecedents in Greek thought. The courageous, independent way in which Thomas Aquinas went to work in his analysis of the social structure shows him as no mere copyist of Aristotle. The Dominican scholar, however faithfully he interpreted the *Politics* of Aristotle, did as often the work of an originator as that of commentator.

The fact that Aquinas returns again and again to subjects where Church teaching illuminates and can be brought also to regulate social practice, proves how conscious the Christian philosopher was of the need of understanding phenomena which had been regarded as altogether outside the purview of Christian thought for so many centuries. The social teaching of Aquinas is not a slavish imitation of a unique original. He goes beyond the authority of Aristotle and draws from the patristic literature of the Church and also upon Roman law as sources for a genuine and authoritative treatment. More than this, there are numerous passages where the Dominican scholar makes independent observations on the social conditions of his own time. To such a degree is he sometimes influenced by these independent observations as to run counter even to the dicta of his accepted authorities. To do full justice to Aquinas it must be remembered that he had no conception of a specific discipline of economics or sociology apart from theology and philosophy. One must be satisfied to group his teachings under categories derived from systems of observation and analogies originating far later than the thirteenth century. But in making this concession one need not or should not adopt the line of apology. One must follow the same method in tracing out the economic views of Sir Thomas More and Lord Bacon, men of



a period far removed from the age of Aquinas and with experience of social phenomena adequate to suggest a new organon of analysis.

The reasons for the late recognition of sociology as an accepted science are here only a matter of concern in so far as this delay in scientific construction might be used to question the achievements of the thinkers of the thirteenth century. Aquinas and his contemporaries took the divisions of knowledge as they found them handed down from ancient authority. The really important thing is to inquire how far these traditional compartments of thought were used for containing new knowledge or for treating older knowledge in a new way. It is easy to put this question to the test by examining Aquinas's treatment of slavery, a subject which is a classical instance of what must be called the reactionary tendency of Aristotelian political science.

In Aristotle's *Politics* slavery is recognized as a social institution grounded in the law of nature, and therefore unchangeable and permanent. When Aquinas, following Aristotle, based slavery on natural law, he was not reproducing a past argument for a social institution no longer in existence. In Aquinas's days slavery existed in all European countries except England. The slave trade still flourished in many European countries, especially in Italy, Aquinas's own birthplace, where slaves of all nationalities were imported without let or hindrance.

The natural-law foundation for slavery is taken over directly by Aquinas from Aristotle, but the mediaeval thinker embarks upon a new field of speculation as soon as he applies to the personality of the slave the concepts of Christian ethics. The slave, Aquinas affirms, is a full and complete personality, endowed with reason, free-will, and full moral potentialities.



Even looked at as a material good, the slave is not under the unlimited control of the master, "for all men are by nature equal."

The application of this principle cuts away completely the groundwork of the classical conception of the slave as the passive instrument of his master, rightly under higher control because, as Aristotle expressed it, some men by their lack of reasoning power are fitted only for the servile status. Very different from this is Aquinas's statement that the slave is only the property of his master in a defined sphere of personal services. The slave has the right of self-conservation, the right to marry and bring up children, the right also to follow a celibate life.

Even in his recognition of the basis of slavery as derived from natural law Aquinas parts company with Aristotle by pointing out that slavery as an institution rests rather upon international custom than upon the law of nature. Only a kind of opportunism can be cited as a justification for violating the principle that all men are by birth equal. "Natural" can only be applied to the existence of slavery in so far as it is useful that the less intelligent should be directed by the more intelligent. Slavery in the social order is, as he sees it, a product of fallen nature, and its existence is based on social values brought about by what must be called purely temporary conditions. As to the status of grace prior to the Fall, Aquinas reasons that even in the Golden Age humanity could not have been moulded on one uniform pattern, but that there must have been under the diversities of personality differences of order and subordination. At the present day the discussion of slavery has passed out of the sphere of debatable treatment, but not many years have elapsed since the institution of African slavery was handled by Christian people in a far more reactionary sense



than could be justified by the arguments of scholastic thought.

In accordance with the dialectical methods used in all scholastic writing, Aquinas devotes much attention to the arguments against private property. A communistic system of property would, he admits, be in complete harmony with the state of unfallen humanity. Mutual jealousies would not then intervene to make it impossible. Only the condition of fallen humanity gives legitimacy to the existence of private property, and in so far it can be called in accordance with natural law. Reason shows us the result of human experience that material goods are used to attain the ends appointed for them only if they are under individual control. Communism, therefore, cannot be applied under normal human conditions. The justification of private property is very much the same kind of deduction from the law of nature as the recognition that clothing is necessary, though by nature man is naked.

A further ground for the existence of private property is found in positive law; i. e., governmental sanction is added to reinforce convictions which are common to mankind. People generally have recognized the usefulness of private property; therefore their various systems of law contain sanctions enforcing the implications that follow upon this recognition. So we find the custom of inheritance of private property, because parents have not only to provide for the temporary maintenance of their offspring but are morally bound to extend their care over the whole period of the children's existence.

Attempts have been made by some recent critics to show that Aquinas abandons the patristic tradition when he so strongly posits the necessity of private property. As a matter of fact he differs from such teachers as Basil and Ambrose largely in form of expression only. Whereas they have spoken in hortatory language using rhetorical methods, Aquinas follows



the didactic terms of mediaeval treatise. The social obligations attaching to the use of private property are as fully recognized by Aquinas as by his predecessors. This side of the question is brought up in the discussion of almsgiving. Aristotle had championed a limited type of communism in consumption by urging the obligation of generosity among friends: "Things that belong to friends are common." Extending this principle to the great mass of the poor, Aquinas specifically insists upon the duty of giving to the less fortunate members of society the surplusage of private property.

It is an important question to determine what this surplus is. How is it to be arrived at? To determine this we must ask how much does the owner of private property require actually to maintain himself and his dependents. Aquinas is liberal in making this extend beyond bare material necessities. Each person requires enough to keep himself as a member in good standing in the class to which he belongs. Under mediaeval conditions, i. e., under a hierarchically organized society, this was easier to determine than under a competitive type of capitalistic society, where breaking through from lower levels forms the most exciting incentive to action in our humdrum industrial life. The mere chase for earthly possessions is strongly reproved by Aquinas as mammonism. It was assumed that no one would sink below the standard of living common to the class to which one belonged, but also the common American passion to emerge from it was not encouraged. An upward advancing social progress was far from the conceptions of mediaeval thought: from this point of view the teaching of Aquinas must be called conservative.

But there are limitations to be noted. Aquinas was outlining principles to be applied practically in a period which did not present the common phenomena of capitalized industrial-



ism. In the thirteenth century there were no classes of people living on wages as laborers during their whole lifetime. There were no proletarian masses. The ethical presuppositions of modern industrialism have been handled masterfully and convincingly by Troeltsch. In mediaeval life the working man rose by becoming a master: he passed normally from the status of an apprentice to that of an employer of younger men in small numbers under his personal direction and oversight. Masses of people kept to a fixed level through an organized system of factory labour on an unprecedented scale, as under our present industrial system, present phenomena requiring the fearless application of the principles of Christian justice and love. There is an insistent demand for the curative treatment of social ills which are created by the present phase of Western civilization.

Professional mendicancy is not encouraged by this aspect of the teaching of Aquinas, which ultimately depends on the extension of the concept of brotherhood, so firmly embedded in the original Christian tradition. The recipient of aid must be in actual need of help and, besides, the extension of help is an obligation not imposed by law but is left to the conscience of the individual benefactor. In extreme need the victim, hard-pressed by external conditions, is justified by the natural right of self-maintenance in taking the amount of material goods necessary to support life. He can go to the length of doing this against the will of the owner of the property. This subordination of the right of property to the pressure of necessity is familiar enough in modern systems of law under the term eminent domain, by the exercise of which power the State can, for the sake of promoting public utilities, go as far as the confiscation of private property. An important distinction lies in the fact that, according to Aquinas, the judge of the necessity is the individual involved. The principle itself



that is here appealed to is clear enough. External goods are per se intended for the preservation of the human race as a whole. This aim cannot be frustrated by their division under the regime of private property, which division, as has been noted previously, is after all a kind of opportunism whose success has been attested in the field of social experiment.

How is the possession of private property to be accounted for? The explanation offered differs from the "contrat social" theory of Rousseau or the favorite contention of socialism that the foundation of private property is labor. Aquinas assigns a primary place in justifying the right of private property to original occupation. This may be called the preventive right of discovery. An illustration is given from the finding of pearls or precious stones which originally had no owner. If it is objected that this occupation theory would justify the transfer to private ownership of all landed property, Aquinas replies that landed property is oftentimes historically of less importance than the ownership of animals; therefore, actually the extension of private ownership in land seems to appear an illusory danger. Moreover, the control of vast tracts of real property under single control seems to be obviated by the explicit teaching that according to divine order the corporal actions involved in labor are necessary. Even in the status of Paradise there was the obligation to work. Manual labor appears only to be contrasted unfavorably with intellectual pursuits in the case of one who, living ascetically, needs for his self-conservation fewer material goods.

The State did not originate private property, and therefore it must respect the sphere of private ownership. To disregard this principle places the government on the moral level of bandits, or even worse, because of the obligation of the sovereign power to act as the guardian of justice. In its admin-



istration of taxes the State must avoid confiscatory process and should observe existing law, the very existence of which constitutes a kind of contract between sovereign and people. Yet the sphere of private ownership is not outside the bounds of governmental control. By the principles of natural law, private property is a social benefit; this implies the duty of the sovereign power so to promote such an order of society as to harmonize the existence of individual ownership with this principle. The actual administration of such a social order is posited, not explained. It is left to the sphere of social empiricism, as the following quotation shows: "But how the use of privately-owned goods can be made common, this pertains to the province of the good legislator." (Comment in *Polit. lib. 2*, lect. 4.)

Although the details for promoting the practice of private ownership are left altogether vague, the idea itself is explicitly stated. Material goods are to be so divided socially that the zone of middle-class society can be extended as broadly as possible. Legislation as well as administration are in this equally necessary factors. It is not desirable for the State to become rich. Occasionally it seems as if Aquinas would accommodate the aim of taxation solely to the requirement of a system of poor relief. The chief aim is to provide a class of citizens not exposed to the danger of over-possession or liable to sink into the class of the indigent. One can here observe the predominant influence in the schoolman's emphasis on the golden mean ideal of his great authority, Aristotle. Monopolies are dreaded as the cause of depopulation, and the laws of ancient commonwealths, by which restrictions were placed on the taking of profit from individuals in cases of forced sales of private property, are singled out for praise.

The ideal set forth is to maintain existing divisions of



ownership, provided the State itself is receiving advantage from a body of owners sufficiently well off to more than provide for their own material needs. It will be seen that the conservative character of the State so conceived was a preservative against the danger of an anarchy of propertyless individuals who, as the judges of their own extreme need, were justified even in using violence in conserving their lives at the expense of the owners of private property.

Aquinas seems to remain strangely oblivious to the concrete evolution of mediaeval society that was taking place before his gaze when he emphasizes the value of the city as the social unity in economic life. Each city is treated as self-sufficing, and trading between cities is regarded as an exceptional phenomenon liable to dangerous excesses. Foreign elements entering a city for trading purposes are liable to infect social morals. Loose business practices will be introduced, a passionate longing for gain can hardly be avoided and the robust character of the inhabitants will deteriorate if, as is likely, they abandon military service and allow their towns to be defended by mercenaries.

Displaying something like repulsion from the subject Aquinas applies accredited technical formulae to questions of price and values. Yet modern economic theorists are struck by the alertness of the schoolman's mind where it manifests itself by serious anticipations in economic analysis and terminology supposed to belong to the era of advanced capitalism. Socialist theorists have even held that their favourite axiom of the creation of value by labour is implied in this phase of the teaching of Aquinas. As a matter of fact most of the questions originating in this section show that his main instinct was ethical. References to points of primary importance in modern economic theory are after all obiter dicta.



It is the ethical point of view that gives such prominence to the problem of interest on loans in Aquinas's writings. While earlier writers of the scholastic period had emphasized the unlawfulness of interest, basing their objections on biblical passages, we find in Aquinas a vigorous and consistent appeal to the authority of Aristotle. This simply signifies that the Dominican teacher wished to prove the reasonableness of the Church's prohibition of usury. All the resources of a subtle logic are employed to bring conviction. The following is a characteristic passage: "To take interest for borrowed money is per se unjust, because something is sold which is not in existence. This is plainly an inequality which contradicts justice. To recognize this clearly one must consider that there are things the use of which is their consumption. So we consume wine if we use it for drinking, and grain if we use it for eating. In objects of this kind, therefore, the use should not be brought into account apart from the thing itself. To whom the use is transferred the thing itself is at the same time likewise transferred. Whoever, therefore, wishes to sell the wine, and separated therefrom the use of the wine, would sell the same thing twice over or would sell something which does not exist. He would, therefore, render himself plainly guilty of the sin of injustice. There are, however, things, the use of which is not the same as their consumption, e. g., the use of a house is the occupation of the house, not the destruction of the house. Therefore, in such things each of the two can be left separate, as when anyone transfers to another the property of his home under the condition that he has the use of it for himself for a specified time; or, taking the reverse process, who leaves to another the use of the house, reserving to himself the actual ownership. Therefore one can legitimately take a price for the use of the house and besides claim ownership of the house



after it is rented, as is actually done in the renting of a house. Money is chiefly according to the philosopher introduced as an instrument of exchange; therefore the proper and main use of money is its consumption in so far as it is employed in exchange relations. For this reason it is in itself not permissible to ask a price for money that is loaned, i. e., interest."

An explanation and justification of the rigidity of Church teaching in this question is given in the following passage from Professor Taussig's *Principles of Economics* (Vol 2, P. 31): "In mediaeval times the acceptance of interest by lenders was prohibited, at least for Christians (the prohibition was by Church law and applied to Christians only; hence the position of Jews as money lenders). To receive from the borrower more than has been lent was thought unrighteous. The explanation of this attitude, so different from the present-day acceptance of interest as a matter of course, is probably in the main that during the Middle Ages borrowing was chiefly for consumption. When the borrower used loans for his own gainful operations, the bargain between him and the lender as to interest seems natural and equitable. But when he is in need and uses the loan to satisfy pressing wants, the lender's requirement of interest has an aspect of harshness. Moreover, in mediaeval times competition and market rates of interest hardly existed. Such loans as were contracted were often on terms fixed by the necessities of the individual borrower. As the division of labor and the use of money spread, as industry became more mobile, loans for production became common; and with this change came a change in men's point of view regarding interest."

Aquinas himself illustrates this development; he could hardly remain oblivious to the changes rapidly taking place in Italy, nor could he have been unfamiliar with the financial



problems arising under the papal system of taxation with its encouragement to the creation of the instruments of international finance. Exceptions to the prohibition of interest are discussed in accordance with the distinctions found in Roman law under the heads of "*damnum emergens*" and "*lucrum cessans*." Aquinas recognized the legitimacy of the claim of the lender on the borrower where an injury results to one person in consequence of his having made a loan to another. It is agreed that such a recompense could be justly bargained for at the time of making the loan. As to the point of "*lucrum cessans*" under which the borrower compensates the lender for the loss of the amount he would have made if he has employed it gainfully in trade, this was not allowed by Aquinas as a legitimate concession. It has been noted by Professor Ashley that other concessions more dangerous to the integrity of the mediaeval view of the unlawfulness of interest are made in the course of the discussion. A man may, we are told, without sin, borrow from one who is already a usurer, if it is for a good object. Also a man may, without sin, entrust his money to a usurer, if the purpose is not gain, but the safe-keeping of the money.

How restricted were the trade relations of the ordinary mediaeval town may be gathered from the following picture of this stage of community economy given by Professor Carl Bücher in his "*Industrial Revolution*":

"Wholesale trade was exclusively itinerant and market or fair trade: and down to the close of the Middle Ages the majority of the towns probably saw no merchants settled within their walls who carried on wholesale trade from permanent headquarters. Only commodities not produced within the more or less extensive district from which a town drew its supplies were the subject of wholesale trade. We know of but five



kinds: (1) spices and southern fruits; (2) dried and salted fish, which were then a staple food for the people; (3) furs; (4) fine cloths; (5) for North German towns, wine. Though the limits of the territory from which the market of a mediaeval town drew its supplies and to which its sales were made cannot be determined with precision, yet from the economic point of view they formed none the less an independent region. Each town with its surrounding country constituted an autonomous economic unity within which its whole course of economic life was on an independent footing. Today not a sack of wheat is produced even in the most remote farm that is not directly linked to the industrial life of the nation as a whole. Even if it be consumed in the house of the producer, nevertheless a larger portion of the means of its production (the plough, the scythe, the threshing machine, the artificial fertilizers, the draught animals, etc.) is obtained through trade."

The grounds for the opposition of mediaeval writers to the taking of interest is illustrated also by Professor Bücher in the same chapter. "It may even be doubted," he says, "whether in mediaeval trade credit operations can be spoken of at all. Early exchange is based upon ready payment. Nothing is given except where a tendered equivalent can be directly received. Almost the entire credit system is clothed in the form of purchase."

Now that we recognize scholasticism as the vestibule of the Renaissance, references to its remoteness from living thought are altogether out of place. Burton Adams remarks with much appropriateness: "To hold up certain absurdities of scholasticism to ridicule, as has sometimes been done, as if they indicated the real character of the system, is to furnish good evidence of our own narrowness of mind." (*Civilization During*



the Middle Ages, p. 360.) Perhaps after all the "lacunae" in mediaeval systemic thought are more indicative of its weaknesses than what Lord Bacon characterized as its "cobwebs of learning." Adherence to classical models seems to have closed the eyes of a man as vigorously endowed as Aquinas to the essential movement in the fabric of society in which he lived. The political forces at work around him are far from being reflected in his studies of the economic and social field. Positive value, however, must be allowed to the method of scholasticism as a discipline by which the European mind was trained to face problems which the system itself disregarded. Even a higher value must be given to the demand fostered by Scholasticism that a society organized with transcendent aims, such as the Mediaeval Church, cannot divorce itself from concrete phenomena and seeks salvation in a nescience which puts aside human nature because man and his normal activities are merely transitory. However we may wonder at the attachment of mediaeval thought to Aristotle as the "master of those who know", the mastery of his system and its tentative application to all problems made "other worldliness" an impossible platform for the Christian Church. Saints and mystics dreamed visions but the rulers of Mediaeval Christianity could not, under the leadership of Aristoteleian thought, sweep into the empyrion of dreamland or develop into sacred Lamas protected from earthly contacts. So one must say that Christian civilization in its achievement and its outlook came largely to depend on the unwillingness felt by scholastic thinkers to neglect even the half assimilated or inadequately applied fragments of a great classical tradition.