Aquinas’ Humanism
Medieval Interpreters of Aristotle
CLAS 4451/RELS 4451/CLAS 5701
(Winter Term)
Class Description

It appears as if a deified humanity with infinite appetite for consumption and experience, endless expectations of what the union of science and technology can accomplish, and neither recognizing nor setting limits on its freedom, is close to the terminus of an historical progress which is also the destruction of the conditions of human life on earth. The natural and engineering sciences which have enabled this seem capable now only of measuring our steps toward this extinction, or proposing solutions of extreme and incalculable danger. The philosophical, theological, social, and humanistic disciplines which were or are implicated in creating both this self-confident divine Anthropos and its cynical nihilist despair have been made, or have made themselves, powerless to move it. However, as the Encyclical “Laudatio si” indicates, this global world order was largely a creation of the Christian West and spread or imposed from and by it. It behooves us then to investigate how it came about and what its essential elements are. The history this class covers will not bring all the essentials into view but some cruxes will appear. Exposing these is its aim.

My method in this seminar will differ from what I usually do: I shall not work with members on discerning the logic and argument of a single text. In fact, we shall read no text completely. Instead we shall look at portions of several texts from Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Boethius, Eriugena, and Aquinas as embedded in my interpretations of them in order to try to discern the character of an historical development. The following contain most of my argument and most of the texts we shall examine:

These two summarize my argument.

and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 71–96. Examines how the characteristic form of human knowing and willing is restored after its absorption into the Divine.


Everything necessary for the class will be posted on its Brightspace site, but participants will find it useful to have a copy of the collected dialogues of Plato, Aristotle’s De Anima, Metaphysics, and Nicomachean Ethics, the Enneads of Plotinus, the Confessions of Augustine, the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius, portions of the Periphyseon of Eriugena, and the Summa theologiae of Aquinas. A great many of my publications and those of my students are posted. Reading them all will be neither possible or desirable; many embed things useful for this class in contexts quite outside it. I shall continue to give guidance as to what portions will most usefully be worked through by participants.

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