

4-1-1984

# Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology

Norman J. Threinen

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Threinen, Norman J. (1984) "Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology," *Consensus*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol10/iss2/3>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

## BOOKS IN REVIEW

### *LUTHER AND LATE MEDIEVAL THOMISM*

DENIS R. JANZ

Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid

Laurier University Press, 1984

xii + 186 pp. \$17.00; \$19.75 U.S.

In 1517 Luther drew up 97 theses in which he criticized the scholastic theologians for their errors. Most of the errors attacked were those found in the theology of Gabriel Biel; in a very real way the disputation is the culmination of Luther's break with his nominalist teachers. However, it is not only the nominalists (*doctores moderni*) which are attacked; the whole of scholastic theology, including the theology of the Thomists (*doctores antiqui*), was included in Luther's criticism. In Luther's view Thomas was "the source and foundation of all heresy, error and obliteration of the Gospel" (p. 3). Did Luther actually have a sufficient knowledge of Thomas to dismiss him so abruptly? Janz contends that Luther was mistaken in his conviction that the theological anthropology of Thomas was essentially Pelagian. In fact, says Janz, on the question of the capacity of man's natural powers unaided by grace (*de potentia hominis ex suis naturalibus*). Thomas moved from an ambiguous and perhaps Semipelagian position in his earlier writings to an unequivocally Augustinian position in the *Summa Theologiae*.

How was it that Luther could be guilty of thus wrongly assessing Thomas? Janz points out that certain statements of Thomas were open to Semipelagian interpretation and that in the late Middle Ages the authority of Thomas was called upon to support such teachings. However, John Capreolus at the University of Paris, "the greatest Thomist of the late Middle Ages," went to great pains to point out the anti-Pelagian character of Thomas' theology of nature and grace. Unfortunately, Capreolus' *Defensiones*, written to allow Thomas to reply to his various posthumous

opponents, became known in Germany only at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Then it was quickly replaced by the *Summa Commentary* of Cajetan, the Papal Legate who initiated proceedings which finally resulted in Luther's excommunication in 1520.

While Cajetan's interpretation of Thomas' position and the prevailing interpretation in Germany of Thomas' theological anthropology would have confirmed Luther's low assessment of Thomas, these were likely not the sources of Luther's information. Luther's source of information was rather Andreas Karlstadt, Luther's colleague on the faculty in Wittenberg who shortly after his conversion to the cause of the Reformation published 151 theses which explicitly, in the name of Augustine, attacked scholastic theology and in particular Thomism. These theses, in Janz' view, "seriously misrepresented the teaching of Thomas and Capreolus" (p. 122). But Luther was convinced by this former Thomist; his 97 theses against the scholastic theologians, published five months later, show many similarities to Karlstadt's theses.

Janz concludes that there is a basic compatibility between Luther and Thomas on theologic-anthropological questions and that it would have been "perfectly appropriate" for Luther to have cited Thomas Aquinas against the modern Pelagians of his day (p. 157). A case for this is convincingly made in this study. It invites closer examination by anyone interested in honestly assessing Luther's attitude toward Thomas Aquinas and the Thomists.

NJT