

AQUINAS' CRITIQUE OF 13th CENTURY RADICAL APOCALYPTICISMS

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Article abstract

The temptation to radical apocalypticism has plagued the Church in every age since the time of the apostles. Yet some moments, such as the recent COVID-19 crisis, are especially ripe for such tendencies. In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas had to confront radical apocalypticism on two fronts: from the followers of Joachim of Fiore and from the mendicants' opponents among the secular priests at the University of Paris. These confrontations gave Aquinas occasion to articulate a balanced approach to eschatology, rooted in Scripture and the tradition of the Fathers. In this paper, I examine Aquinas' critique of radical eschatology in the context of a broader examination of his theology of history. Aquinas' sober analysis, I maintain, can serve us well in confronting our own struggles with radical eschatologies.

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PATRICK CRAINE

Confronted by the “terrors of history,” or even the everyday struggles of living in our fallen world, Christians are ever at risk of a false hope in the imminence of the peace and joy promised at the final fulfillment of God’s kingdom. The COVID-19 crisis of recent years, combining a global threat to health with severe restrictions on movement and assembly, presented a perfect storm for renewal of Christian apocalypticism. The seemingly unprecedented nature of events proved an impossible temptation for many inclined to apply Christ’s warnings of calamities and persecutions to our own times. Some saw the COVID crisis as a great chastisement preceding the Antichrist, and in certain quarters the vaccines were derided as diabolical or even as the “mark of the beast.” The temptation to project an imminent consummation of history, or to ascribe a definitive character to intrinsically foggy private discernments about the “signs of the times,” has plagued the Church in every age since the time of the apostles.

Still, during Church history these tendencies to apocalyptic prophesy are particularly prominent at certain moments, often in response to societal upheavals. In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) had to confront radical eschatologies at one such moment, resisting them on two fronts. First, from the followers of Joachim of Fiore, who preached an imminent intra-historical ‘eternal gospel’ that would usher in a period of peace and perfection on earth. Second, from the mendicants’ opponents among the secular priests at the University of Paris, led by William of St. Amour, who claimed the new orders heralded the arrival of the Antichrist. These confrontations gave Aquinas occasion to articulate a balanced approach to eschatology, rooted in Scripture and the tradition of the Fathers.

This paper examines Aquinas’ critique of radical eschatology in the context of a broader examination of his theology of history. Despite claims that Aquinas is “conceptualist” and a-historical, he has a clear account of the providential and eschatological ordering of salvation history. This account, moreover, informs his response to radical eschatology. The paper is divided into two sections. The first surveys Aquinas’ account of the eschatological

shape of history, as he presents it in his Treatise on Law. The second examines how he deploys this account in responding to the apocalypticism of the Joachites and seculars. Aquinas' sober analysis, I maintain, can serve us well in confronting our own struggles with radical eschatologies.

I. Aquinas' Theology of History

Aquinas' theology of history was a major subject of debate among Thomists in the 20th century. Historicity was, of course, one of the dominant themes of philosophical and theological discourse in the last century, and naturally the question of how to situate Aquinas in this field of inquiry was of great interest.¹ Some devotees of Aquinas, even one as eminent as Étienne Gilson, maintained he was indifferent to questions of historicity.² These claims were perhaps conditioned by tendencies among some Thomists in the decades leading up to Vatican II to present Aquinas' thought in an overly static and atemporal manner. But they were quickly countered by a bevy of studies, from the pens of influential thinkers such as Max Seckler, Marie-Dominique Chenu, and Yves Congar, showing Aquinas' attention to historical development and highlighting that he has a clear theology of history imbedded in his work, even if he did not develop it explicitly for its own sake in the way we might today.³

Expositors of Aquinas' theology of history have focused on different texts in his oeuvre. This on its own suggests how important theology of history is to his thought: his understanding of God's providential ordering of creation is necessarily expressed in his approach to various questions because it is foundational. We see him express a theology of history, for example, in considering the historical development of the articles of faith,⁴ change over time in the degrees of prophecy,⁵ and the fittingness of the timing of Christ's resurrection.⁶

1. Jean-Pierre Torrell provides a thorough *status quaestionis* on the 20th century debate over Aquinas' theology of history in "Saint Thomas et l'histoire: État de la question et pistes de recherches," *Revue Thomiste*, 105 (2005), pp. 355-409.

2. See Étienne GILSON, "Cajetan et l'humanisme théologique," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 22 (1955), pp. 113-36 (at p. 133).

3. See, e.g., Yves CONGAR, "Le sens de l'économie salutaire dans la 'théologie' de S. Thomas d'Aquin," in Erwin ISELOH and Peter MANNs (eds.), *Festgabe Joseph Lortz*, Vol. 2, Baden-Baden, Grimm, 1958, pp. 73-122; Marie-Dominique CHENU, *Introduction à l'étude de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Institut d'études médiévales 11), Paris, J. Vrin, 1954; MAX SECKLER, *Le salut et l'histoire: la pensée de saint Thomas d'Aquin sur la théologie de l'histoire* (Cogitatio fidei 21), Paris, Cerf, 1967. A recent discussion of Congar's engagement with Aquinas' theology of history can be found in Paul CLARKE, "The Post-Traditional Ontology and Hermeneutics of Congar's Theology of History," *New Blackfriars*, 103 (2022), pp. 499-516.

4. *Summa Theologiae* (= *ST*) II-II, q. 1, a. 7.

5. *ST*, II-II, q. 174, a. 6. Fr. Lawrence Dewan, O.P., pointed to this *Summa* article in this journal while examining Aquinas' theology of history. See "Some Remarks Occasioned by a Reading of Otto Hermann Pesch," *Science et Esprit*, 53 (2001), pp. 143-153.

6. *ST*, III, q. 53, a. 2.

However, I think we find the most developed expression of Aquinas' theology of history in his *Treatise on Law* (ST I-II, qq. 90-108), and in particular the set of questions within that treatise examining the divine law (qq. 98-108). This is where my exposition will focus. We will look first at the *Treatise on Law* in general, situating the treatise's approach to history within the broader plan of the *Summa Theologiae*, and then we will examine the *Treatise on Divine Law* specifically.

1. *The Treatise on Law as Theology of History*

The idea of looking at a treatise on *law* for a theology of history might seem odd at first. However, Aquinas' view of law is richer and broader than our ordinary understanding of law today. In the *Treatise on Law*, Aquinas articulates his view of God as the author of history directing us toward Himself, our final end, through successive stages of salvation history. The *Summa Theologiae* has an *exitus-reditus* plan: it begins with God and his creation (*Prima Pars*), then treats humanity's advance towards God in the moral life (*Secunda Pars*), and finally takes up Christ and the sacraments as the means by which humanity is reunited with God (*Tertia Pars*). The study of law fits within the first part of the *Secunda Pars* as one of two external principles by which God acts in history to draw us toward Himself. In the case of law, He does this through *instruction*, and in the case of the second external principle, grace, He does it by his own *assistance*. (The *Treatise on Grace* appears right after the *Treatise on Law*, at I-II, qq. 109-114.)

According to Aquinas, law is a rule and measure of human acts whereby we are directed to our last end.⁷ Its proper effect is to lead those subject to it to virtue, to make them good.⁸ Law, by his definition, must include four essential criteria to be authentic: it is (1) an ordinance of reason (2) directed to the common good (3) established by the rightful authority (4) who must promulgate it.⁹ All law is a participation, in its own fashion, in the eternal law of God, by which He orders and directs his creation. The eternal law is the eternal and unchangeable Divine Reason governing the universe, ordaining and foreknowing all things that unfold in the course of time, and leading them towards their last end, which is God Himself.¹⁰

We participate in the eternal law insofar as our acts are ordered by it through its instantiation in the three forms of law that are derived from it: *natural*, *human*, and *divine* law.¹¹ Natural law is the rational creature's participation in

7. See ST, I-II, q. 90, a. 1.

8. See ST, I-II, q. 92, a. 1.

9. See ST, I-II, q. 90, aa. 1-4.

10. See ST, I-II, q. 91, a. 1 and ST I-II, q. 93, a. 1.

11. See ST, I-II, q. 93, a. 3.

the eternal law, by which we are inclined to the acts and ends proper to our nature.¹² Human law is the application of natural law to the particularities of human communities.¹³ However, because humanity is ordained to a supernatural end that is outside of our normal capacities, we need a law to direct us beyond our nature; this is divine law.¹⁴ Just as a governor shares his authority with his subordinates, who act in his name and by his power, so natural, human, and divine law participate in eternal law, acting as secondary causes.¹⁵ This point is crucial for Aquinas' theology of history. For Aquinas, God ennobles humanity by allowing us to be true, free actors in fulfilling God's eternal plan. So by our participation in natural, human, and divine law, we participate in God's eternal plan and God's unveiling of that plan.

God's providential ordering of history is thus revealed through these three forms of law, each in their own way. But it is revealed most especially through *divine law*, whereby God directly intervenes, supernaturally, to reveal his plan for history, especially humanity's final end of Beatitude, and orders human acts toward that end.

2. *The Eschatological Shape of History in the Treatise on Divine Law*

Now let us turn to the *Treatise on Divine Law* (ST I-II, qq. 98-108) and consider how Aquinas here presents the development of salvation history. While we can participate to a degree, according to our nature, in the eternal law, and thus can achieve authentic insights into the meaning of history, only in divine law does God reveal to us the fullness of this meaning. In the *Treatise on Divine Law*, Aquinas shows how God reveals this meaning progressively in time through direct intervention. Aquinas identifies three primary states, distinguished according to the manner of humanity's worship of God and its relation to humanity's final end of Beatitude:

(1) *Earthly life under the Old Law* given to his Chosen People of Israel. This stage is figurative of both Christ as the way to Beatitude and Beatitude itself, and there is faith and hope in both.

(2) *Earthly life under the New Law* instituted by Christ, in which the way to Beatitude is revealed, but Beatitude itself is still foreshadowed. There is faith and hope in heavenly goods, but not in the means to obtain them because the means are present.

12. See ST, I-II, q. 91, a. 2, and q. 94.

13. See ST, I-II, q. 91, a. 3, and q. 95.

14. See ST, I-II, q. 91, aa. 4-5.

15. See ST, I-II, q. 93, a. 3.

(3) *Heavenly life of Beatitude*, in which we gaze directly on God without figure. Both the heavenly goods and the means to obtain them are present, so there is neither faith nor hope.¹⁶

Divine law, then, directed toward our ultimate end of Beatitude, is divided fundamentally into two: Old and New.¹⁷

In the first question of the *Treatise on Divine Law* (q. 98), Aquinas shows that while there is one God and one divine law, it was fitting that God unveiled it in degrees leading up to the full revelation of Christ in the New Law. He thus emphasizes the continuity of divine law. Old and New are united in that they share a common end, but they are related as *imperfect* to *perfect*. They are not distinct as different in species, but as the imperfect and perfect within the same species, in their degree of closeness to their common end. He uses the image of human development. The Old Law is as a child under a teacher, while the New is as an adult who no longer needs a teacher. The Old Law was good, because it helped achieve the end toward which divine law is directed, namely Beatitude, but it is imperfectly good because it cannot reach this end on its own. The New Law is perfectly good because it achieves this end, conferring the grace that flows from the cross of Christ.¹⁸

While, according to Aquinas, the Old Law was principally external, prescribing and prohibiting many outward acts, and written on tablets of stone, the New Law is internal, a law of grace, faith, and freedom, and written on our hearts. The New Law, he says, is “chiefly the grace itself of the Holy Ghost, which is given to those who believe in Christ.”¹⁹ Secondly, the New Law contains those things that dispose us to receive grace, and that pertain to the use of grace, such as the teachings of the faith, the commandments, and the sacraments.²⁰

A central purpose of the *Treatise on Divine Law* is to analyze the transition from Old Law to New Law, which he describes as a process of *fulfillment*. The Old Law foreshadows or prefigures the New Law, and the New Law fulfills that which is contained in the Old. The New Law fulfills the Old Law both regarding its *end* and the *precepts* it contained.²¹ The end was justification, which the Old Law foreshadowed but which could only be accomplished by Christ. The analysis of the precepts of the Old Law forms the majority of the *Treatise on Divine Law*. They are developed in detail, but with the ultimate purpose of elucidating the New Law. He divides the Old Law into three kinds of precepts – moral, ceremonial, and judicial – and examines how each foreshadowed the

16. See *ST*, I-II, q. 101, a. 2, and q. 103, a. 3.

17. See *ST*, I-II, q. 91, a. 5.

18. See *ST*, I-II, q. 98, a. 1.

19. *ST*, I-II, q. 106, a. 1. Translations taken from *Summa Theologiae*, trans. English Dominican Fathers, New York NY, Benziger Bros., 1948.

20. See *ST*, I-II, q. 106, aa. 1-2.

21. See *ST*, I-II, q. 107, a. 2.

New Law, were fulfilled by it, and are now established within the New Law. So we get an analysis of the New Law that is tied closely to its continuity in relation to the Old Law.

In addition to this development from the Old Law, to the New Law, to Beatitude, Aquinas discusses development *within* the Old Law, under which God unveils Himself progressively leading up to His definitive revelation in Christ.²² Aquinas sees Israel's movement from worship in the desert, to the Tabernacle, and finally to the Temple as a microcosm of salvation history itself. While the Old Law did not change in terms of fulfillment, which only occurred with Christ, it did change as a result of the changing circumstances of the people who lived under it. Aquinas offers two possible figurative explanations for this progression towards worship in the Temple. First, it could signify the transition from the present changeable life to the future unchangeable life. Second, it could signify the transition from the Old to the New Law.

3. Sorokin's Charge

How can we characterize this Thomistic theory of history, and how can we place it within the range of Christian and non-Christian thought on the shape of history? The question exceeds the scope of our paper; however, engaging one attempt at situating Aquinas can help us towards our larger purpose of examining Aquinas' critique of radical eschatologies.

The Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968) cites these questions on the divine law that we have just discussed as he situates Aquinas' theory of history within his account of developing views on the shape of history from antiquity to modernity.²³ According to Sorokin, the fourth century saw the rise of an *eschatological* conception of history in Europe, distinguished from various *linear* views that receded as Christianity came to dominate European culture. This eschatological view is marked by a belief in the finiteness of time, which is situated between two terminal points (Paradise and Last Judgment) that are both considered states of perfection. The time-between is seen as "infinitely more degraded" than these terminal points, and has no defined shape. Rather, it is seen as "trendlessly undulating" between "relative 'ups and downs.'"²⁴

By Sorokin's account, in the 17th century this view begins to be replaced by a *progressive linear* conception of history that sees humanity on a continuous arc of "betterment and perfection."²⁵ For Sorokin, such thinking finds its full

22. See *ST*, I-II, q. 102, a. 4, ad 2.

23. Pitirim SOROKIN, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 2, London, Allen and Unwin, 1937, pp. 368-373.

24. Pitirim SOROKIN, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 2, pp. 368-369.

25. Pitirim SOROKIN, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 2, p. 351.

bloom with the three-staged social evolutionary theory of Auguste Comte in the 19th century, in which societies progress from a primitive “theological” stage, through a “metaphysical” stage, to a final enlightened “positivist” stage.²⁶ Sorokin situates Aquinas firmly within the eschatological view; however, he suggests that the theories of history advanced by Aquinas (he cites *ST*, I-II, qq. 98, 106, and 107), Albert the Great, Joachim of Fiore, and other thinkers of the 12th to 13th centuries, begin to take on slight but distinct notes of linearity. While still “minor themes,” he sees in these thinkers already the beginning articulations of the view that history develops through stages on a progressive arc of perfection. Sorokin’s comparison of Aquinas and Joachim on this score is of interest. We will return to consider his characterization of Aquinas more closely in short order when we examine Aquinas’ critique of Joachim.

II. Aquinas’ Critique of Radical Apocalypticisms

We now turn to examining Aquinas’ critique of radical eschatologies in his time, as espoused by, first, the disciples of Joachim of Fiore, and second, the secular masters at the University of Paris. He confronts two distinct claims: first, the Joachite view that there will be a third age in history superseding that of the New Law; and second, the idea that we can know when the age of the New Law will end, and that it is imminent. The Joachites and the seculars were in fact alike in claiming an imminent end to the age of the New Law, though the seculars were orthodox in believing there was no future earthly age. We will begin by looking at the historical background to Aquinas’ treatment of radical eschatology, then we will consider in turn his arguments against these two claims.

1. *Historical Background*

Aquinas faced both of these views early in his career, in 1254, when he was a bachelor at the University of Paris. A Franciscan student, Gerardo di Borgo San Donnino, ignited controversy when he published the text *Evangelium aeternum* (“The eternal gospel”), gathering three of Joachim’s works and interpreting them in an introduction.²⁷

A Calabrian abbot, Joachim (c. 1135-1202) had claimed one could predict the future, without the gift of prophecy, by applying a strict concordance of the development of history in Scripture to history after Christ. He divided

26. See Pitirim SOROKIN, “A Survey of the Cyclical Conceptions of Social and Historical Process,” *Social Forces*, 6 (1927), pp. 28-40 (at p. 28).

27. A good overview of the controversy in Bernard MCGINN, “The Abbot and the Doctors: Scholastic Reactions to the Radical Eschatology of Joachim of Fiore,” *Church History*, 40 (1971), pp. 30-47.

time into three main stages: (1) the age of the Father, from Adam to Christ; (2) the age of the Son, from King Uzziah to Joachim's own time; and (3) the age of the Spirit, from St. Benedict to the final judgment at the end of time.²⁸ Joachim's theory was not novel in proposing to divide history into stages; his novelty was in proposing a new stage of history, in time, to be inaugurated after Christ's institution of the New Covenant.

Gerardo and other mendicants of the time seized on Joachim's view and turned it into an argument that the new religious orders were ushering in this new, final age of history. They assigned the beginning of the age of the Spirit a specific date, 1260, based on an exegesis of Revelation 12:6, and they highlighted poverty as the key eschatological sign. Gerardo claimed that Joachim's writings were themselves the "eternal gospel" that abrogated the New Testament. The new outpouring of the Spirit would begin an age of perfection, ruled by the new religious. Gerardo's work was condemned by the Pope in 1255.

Gerardo's text gave ammunition to the anti-mendicant polemic of the secular masters at the university, led by William of St. Amour (c. 1200-1272), who were upset in particular because the mendicants had been taking over teaching positions. Some of the seculars fell into their own form of radical eschatology, claiming the mendicants themselves were heralds of Antichrist and a sign that the end of time was near. William articulated these views in his treatise *De periculis novissimorum temporum* ("On the dangers of the last times") published in 1256.²⁹ He presents a series of signs by which to identify false apostles, clearly pointing to the behaviour of the mendicant friars. The work was condemned by the Pope in 1256.

Aquinas first engages with radical eschatologies in the midst of this controversy, in the fourth book of his *Commentary on the Sentences*, written around 1256. In considering both the general resurrection (d. 43) and the general judgment (d. 47), he takes up whether we can know when the end of time will come. In one passage he engages explicitly with Joachite thought and refers to the abbot Joachim.³⁰ He develops these points further by 1265-1266 in considering the same question in his *De potentia* (q. 5, a. 6). He gives his final and fullest critique of the Joachite doctrine of the eternal gospel in his treatment of the New Law in the *Summa Theologiae* (I-II, q. 106, a. 4) written around 1268-1271.³¹ Aquinas' opposition to these views was vehement

28. This description is based on Joachim's own text, translated at Bernard MCGINN, "The Abbot and the Doctors," p. 33.

29. A recent translation of William's text is available in Guy GELTNER, *William of Saint Amour's De Periculis Novissimorum Temporum: A Critical Edition, Translation, and Introduction* (Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations 8), Leuven, Peeters, 2008.

30. See *In IV Sent.*, d. 43, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 2, ad 3.

31. Jean-Pierre Torrell provides the most current chronology of Aquinas' works, compiled by Gilles Emery, in the appendix of *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin: Sa personne et son oeuvre*³, Paris, Cerf, 2015.

and consistent. Scholar Bernard McGinn observes that “of all the scholastic authors [Aquinas’] reaction to Joachim and the Joachites is by far the most consistently hostile”.³² But naturally his opposition to William and the seculars appears even more “hostile,” given its polemic context. In fact, Aquinas’ most extensive treatment of radical eschatology appears in his treatise responding to them, titled *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem*, written in 1256. Drawing on these Thomistic texts, we will now consider Aquinas’ response to the two claims we have identified.

2. *No Future Age of History*

First, let us see how he rejects the notion of the “eternal gospel.” We will focus on his last text on the subject, in the *Summa Theologiae*. As we noted, in Aquinas’ treatment of divine law (*ST*, I-II, qq. 98-108), he presents three distinct states of humanity: the Old Law of Israel, the New Law instituted by Christ, and the future glory of heaven. In his treatment of the New Law (*ST*, I-II, qq. 106-108), he devotes an article specifically to the Joachite views, explicitly rejecting the idea that there is an additional state between the New Law and future glory. In *ST*, I-II, q. 106, a. 4, he asks: “Will the New Law last until the end of the world?” His central argument is that the New Law is the closest we can get to the last end in this life, and is the “immediate cause” of our attainment of the last end. He bases his argument on Heb 10, which argues for Christ’s centrality in salvation history, as the one who sanctified us “once for all” (v. 10) and “for all time” (v. 12). Aquinas quotes vv. 19-22: “Having therefore, brethren, a confidence in the entering into the Holies by the blood of Christ, a new way which He hath dedicated for us [...] let us draw near.”³³ If Christ is the way to glory, then no age can more fully lead us to glory, and thus there can be no more perfect age in this life. Moreover, he maintains that within this age of the New Law we cannot expect a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit than we have received before, citing a gloss on Rom 8:23 claiming the apostles received grace more abundantly than others.

He rejects the idea that the Holy Spirit is still expected to come in the future, noting this is contrary to the Book of Acts, which clearly shows the promise of the Spirit was fulfilled with the apostles.³⁴ Then he explicitly rejects the Joachites’ division of ages according to the three persons of the Trinity. The Old Law was an age of the Father *and* the Son, insofar as it foreshadowed

32. Bernard MCGINN, “The Abbot and the Doctors,” p. 37.

33. Aquinas’ original Latin, taken from the Vulgate, reads: *habentes itaque, fratres, fiduciam in introitu sanctorum in sanguine Christi, quam initiavit nobis viam novam, accedamus ad eum.*

34. *ST*, I-II, q. 106, a. 4, ad 2.

the Son; and the New Law is an age of Christ *and* the Spirit. Thus, he says, “we are not to look forward to another law corresponding to the Holy Spirit”.³⁵

Now, with Aquinas’ critique of Joachim in mind, let us take up again Pitirim Sorokin’s comparison of the two medieval thinkers. Sorokin claims that Aquinas’ description of development from Old Law to New Law under the mode of *perfection* plants a seed that grows into the modern linear progressive view, and he treats Aquinas and Joachim as similar on this point. According to Sorokin, Joachim’s theory of the eternal gospel was “something like a progressively linear law,” with each of his three stages of history “being more perfect than the preceding one: the first being the stage of law and fear or intimidation; the second that of grace and faith; the third that of love.”³⁶ We observe here that the description of Joachim’s view is quite close to what we find in Aquinas: both divide history into stages that increase in perfection, and both see this development taking place from the Old Law to the New Law. However, crucially, as we have noted, Aquinas rejects the notion of the “eternal gospel” as a third stage in history.

For Sorokin, it was intrinsic to the eschatological view that time is situated between two states of perfection, the Fall and Last Judgment. The eschatological view sees the “time-between” as lacking any discernible trend; there is no sense of a necessary linear movement towards perfection or imperfection. But a belief in God’s intervention in history to draw his people back to a state of righteousness (or “perfection”) – beginning in Israel through the Old Law, and ultimately through the coming of Christ in the New Law – is fundamental to the Christian conception of history. Thus, I submit, on this basic point we find a fundamental agreement between Aquinas’ account in the *Treatise on Divine Law*, his primary patristic source in Augustine, and the scriptural testimony of Heb 10. Aquinas gives scholastic articulation to Augustine’s famous dictum, drawn from exegesis of the New Testament, that “the New lies hidden in the Old, and the Old is revealed in the New.”³⁷ If there is novelty in Aquinas, it is in the manner of his explanation, not in his doctrine *per se*.

Notably, while Aquinas does discuss progressive development in the Old Law leading up to the institution of the New Law, as we saw earlier, he does not discuss a parallel progressive development within the New Law, and in fact explicitly dismisses any notion of a linear progression in grace. Aquinas writes: “The state of the New Law is subject to change with regard to various places, times, and persons, according as the grace of the Holy Spirit dwells in man more or less perfectly. Nevertheless we are not to look forward to a state

35. *ST*, I-II, q. 106, a. 4, ad 3.

36. PITIRIM SOROKIN, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 2, p. 372.

37. AUGUSTINE, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, Book 2, § 73. The original Latin reads: *in Vetere Novum lateat, et in Novo Vetus pateat*. See Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, § 16; and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*², Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000, § 129.

wherein man is to possess the grace of the Holy Spirit more perfectly than he has possessed it hitherto, especially the apostles who received the firstfruits of the Spirit, i.e., sooner and more abundantly than others.”³⁸ For Aquinas, then, grace is present in greater or lesser degrees in various times and places, but there is no necessary progression in grace as we approach the end of history.

Joachim, on the other hand, is more open to Sorokin's charge; for in his theory of the “eternal gospel” he introduces a notion of further perfection under the New Law *after* Christ, *within history*. In his theory, we thus have a notion of progressive growth in perfection introduced into history that steps beyond the traditional eschatological/Christian view of history; in this sense we can see him as planting a seed of progressive linearity. Sorokin is wrong to suggest an affinity between Aquinas and Joachim on this point. While Aquinas' use of the dynamic of imperfection and perfection is in line with previous Christian thought, Joachim introduces a notion of perfection within history outside of the traditional Christian understanding of God's revealed plan of salvation.

3. *Impossibility of Knowing the End of Time*

While the strict Joachite view of an “age of the Spirit” may not be common today, there is clear contemporary relevance to the claim of both the Joachites and the seculars that we can foresee the end. We now turn to examining this second claim. Throughout his texts against radical eschatology, Aquinas relies especially on Augustine's *Letter to Hesychius* to argue that we *cannot* know when the end times are approaching.³⁹ He cites several Scripture passages, such as Christ's word to the apostles in Mt 24:36: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (RSV). Others include Mt 24:38-39, Mk 13:32, Acts 1:7, 1 Thes 5:2, and 2 Thes 2:2. In examining his response to this second claim, we will look first at how he describes the right approach to the end times, including his argument for why we cannot predict their arrival, then we will look at how he interprets the “signs of the times” described in the New Testament.

3.1 *The Right Approach to the End Times*

Aquinas agrees with his interlocutors that the days of Antichrist are “at hand,” because, he says, “Sacred Scripture always speaks of time as being very short in comparison to eternity.”⁴⁰ However, he argues that no scriptural passage can

38. *ST*, I-II, q. 106, a. 4, resp.

39. See AUGUSTINE, *Epistle* 199.

40. *Contra impugnantes*, c. 24. Translations taken from *An Apology for the Religious Orders*, Joseph KENNY, O.P., and Aquinas Institute, www.aquinas.cc (eds.), trans. John PROCTER, O.P., London, Sands & Co., 1902.

show that those days are “immediately imminent.”⁴¹ When Scripture says the end is near, it does not speak of a span of time, but of “a certain disposition of the present state of the world.”⁴² That is, it means that no state will succeed the current one until the final judgment. Augustine, he notes, distinguished three types of claims about the time of the final judgment: (1) that it will be *soon*; (2) that it will be *later*; (3) and that we *cannot know*. Only the third is acceptable, and it is “presumption” to claim that the Antichrist will come in a “definite period of time,” no matter how long or short.⁴³ He affirms, with Augustine, that if one were to err by predicting a definite time for the end, it is better to err by claiming the time is *later* rather than *soon*. It is more dangerous to predict that the end is near because “this might occasion men to disbelieve in the end of the world, if it fails to happen when it was foretold.”⁴⁴

Why can we not know the end of time definitively? He says that there are only two ways we can know the future: natural reason and revelation.⁴⁵ But, he argues, it is impossible to know by reason, and God has chosen not to reveal it. In his medieval understanding of natural science, Aquinas connects the end of time with the cessation of movement in the heavens. According to him, we cannot predict when this will occur by natural reason because its cause is the will of God and we cannot know God’s will by our natural powers. We could certainly complexify his account today with our advanced understanding of physics and astronomy. Surely our ability to predict the end of the world by natural means *seems* more within our grasp today than it ever has before.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Aquinas’ point remains firm that any attempt to predict the end definitively by natural means is impossible.

By revelation we could know God’s will as to when time will end, but, Aquinas notes, God chose not to reveal it to the apostles, and “what he did not wish to indicate to the apostles who asked, he will not reveal to others.”⁴⁷

41. *Contra impugnantes*, c. 24.

42. *De potentia*, q. 5, a. 6, ad 9. Translations taken from *On the Power of God*, Aquinas Institute, www.aquinas.cc (ed.), trans. English Dominican Fathers, Westminster, MD, The Newman Press, 1952.

43. *Contra impugnantes*, c. 24. See AUGUSTINE, Epistle 199, ch. 13, § 54.

44. *De potentia*, q. 5, a. 6, resp.

45. See *De potentia*, q. 5, a. 6, resp.

46. Astrophysicists have proposed intricate theories to predict the end of the universe; however, these theories are highly hypothetical, involving many ultimately unpredictable variables. See, e.g., Ker THAN, “Time Will End in Five Billion Years, Physicists Predict,” *National Geographic*, October 29, 2010, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/101027-science-space-universe-end-of-time-multiverse-inflation>. Additionally, while modern industrial developments seem to have made the prospect of ending the world within the grasp of human agency, either via nuclear weapons or destruction of the climate, predicting such human behaviour is and will remain impossible.

47. *In IV Sent.*, d. 43, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 2. Translations taken from *Commentary on the Sentences, Book IV, 43-50*, Michael BOLIN, Jeremy HOLMES, and Peter KWASNIEWSKI (eds.), trans. Beth MORTENSEN, Lander WY, Aquinas Institute, 2018, www.aquinas.cc.

He argues that this is fitting because it ensures that the faithful will remain vigilant in awaiting Christ's return,⁴⁸ and that they will always look ahead to the possibility of God's imminent judgment.⁴⁹ Further, not knowing the time of the end encourages detachment from the world, instilling a constant awareness that the world is passing away.⁵⁰

3.2 *Reading the Signs of the Times*

Many Christians, in Aquinas' time and our own, have thought they could foresee the approach of the end by discerning the "signs of the times." Jesus himself seems to give Christians this very charge in the Gospels when he gives signs that would portend the final judgment (e.g., Mt 24:3-25 and Lk 21:5-36). The epistles also speak of such signs (e.g., 1 Tm 4:1-2, 2 Tm 3:1-9, and 2 Thes 2:1-12). Jesus, in fact, reproves the Pharisees and Sadducees for not recognizing that the time of the Messiah had come by heeding the signs prophesied in the Old Testament (see Mt 16:4, Lk 19:44). So, if Christ expected the Jews to know the time of his coming, surely he expects Christians to be able to anticipate his second coming by heeding the signs he gave for that purpose? But Aquinas disagrees, insisting that the presence of these signs cannot tell us when the world will end. We can divide his analysis of these signs of the times into three points.

First, he stresses that we cannot draw a comparison in this regard between the Old and New Law.⁵¹ In his first coming, Christ came secretly. So, for this coming to be recognized, God had to reveal a specific time for it beforehand. He cites this revelation happening in Dn 9:24-27. Christ's second coming, on the other hand, will be manifest to all with no possibility of error, so God did not need to provide signs pointing to a specific time.

Second, he says not all of these passages about signs of the times necessarily refer to the second coming.⁵² Here he relies on Augustine's exegesis in the *Letter to Hesychius*. According to Augustine, some of the signs refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, already passed, but even more of them are about Christ's daily coming to his Church by grace.

Third, Aquinas says that even those signs given in the New Testament that do refer to the second coming still do not allow us to assign a definite time to the end, because these signs have been present in the Church with greater or lesser intensity throughout its history.⁵³ The apostles called their time "the last

48. See *In IV Sent.*, d. 43, q. 1, a. 3, qa 2.

49. See *De potentia*, q. 5, a. 6, resp.

50. See *De potentia*, q. 5, a. 6, resp.

51. See *In IV Sent.*, d. 47, q. 1, a. 1, qa. 3, ad 1.

52. See *In IV Sent.*, d. 47, q. 1, a. 1, qa. 3, ad 2.

53. See *In IV Sent.*, d. 47, q. 1, a. 1, qa. 3, ad 2.

days” (Acts 2:17) in the face of such signs, without necessarily implying a belief in an imminent end. This need for *historical awareness* is a key theme throughout Aquinas’ treatment of the “signs of the times.” In his *Contra impugnantes*, written in response to William of St. Amour, he examines in turn eight signs that William highlighted to show that the time of Antichrist was at hand.⁵⁴ Some examples include: attempts to alter the Gospel of Christ, the preaching of evil doctrine, persecution and scandalization of the faithful, the appearance of false prophets, and charity growing cold. With one after another, Aquinas stresses that these signs have been present from the beginning of the Church, to varying degrees. Here are examples of texts where he makes this point:

“Even in the days of the apostles, certain men tried to alter the Gospel of Christ...”

“From the earliest days of the Church there has never been a time in which heretical teaching has not been disseminated...”

“This sort of persecution befell the apostles and the martyrs [...] hence the fact that the Church suffers persecution at present, is no more proof that the second advent is at hand than it was in the apostolic age...”

“It is nothing new for holy men to be spoken ill of by the impious...”

So the presence of such signs simply does not suffice to determine the time of the end, whether it will come in five years or a thousand. Further, he says if we were to believe that these troubles are to increase as the end approaches, it still would not be sufficient to determine that the end is imminent because we cannot know how intense they will get before the time of judgment or Antichrist.⁵⁵

III. Conclusion

As we saw in our analysis of the *Treatise on Law*, Aquinas clearly espouses an *eschatological* conception of history in unity with his scriptural and patristic sources. He articulates this view as a development towards *perfection*. However, at the same time, Aquinas also agrees with his forebears that the development of *human history*, within the arc of God’s revealed plan of salvation history, is “trendlessly undulating,” in Sorokin’s parlance; we experience relative ups and downs across time and place, but with no determined law of progression or regression. In the interim period between Christ’s institution of the New Law at his first advent and Christ’s inauguration of the future age of glory at his second advent, God is active in directing history towards its final fulfillment, but this divine action is ultimately mysterious. We can attempt to discern God’s workings in history, but without the certitude that accompanied

54. See *Contra impugnantes*, c. 24.

55. See *In IV Sent.* d. 47, q. 1, a. 1, qa. 3, ad 2.

God's special revelatory interventions. Under the New Law we live in a time of faith and hope in God and His plan for us as individuals and as a human race, but with no new direct special revelation until the consummation of history at the end of time.

So, when will the end come? Aquinas insists the proper Christian response is to plead ignorance. Our examination of the Thomistic texts reveals a mind deeply skeptical of "end times" prophesying. Rather, he insists God refuses to reveal the time of the end so that we will remain vigilant in preparing for Him to come, either at our own death or at Christ's return. Any speculation about when the world will end is mere human conjecture, defying any possibility of definitive declaration. To those who would engage in such speculations, Aquinas counsels developing a deepened historical awareness: Christians in every age have thought they lived in the final years, and every time, so far, they have been wrong. The "end times" will come whether we are watching for signs or not. We will be far better prepared for Christ's second coming by focusing on his daily advent by grace, remaining vigilant in pursuit of virtue, than by pursuing signs and prophecies.

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SUMMARY

The temptation to radical apocalypticism has plagued the Church in every age since the time of the apostles. Yet some moments, such as the recent COVID-19 crisis, are especially ripe for such tendencies. In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas had to confront radical apocalypticism on two fronts: from the followers of Joachim of Fiore and from the mendicants' opponents among the secular priests at the University of Paris. These confrontations gave Aquinas occasion to articulate a balanced approach to eschatology, rooted in Scripture and the tradition of the Fathers. In this paper, I examine Aquinas' critique of radical eschatology in the context of a broader examination of his theology of history. Aquinas' sober analysis, I maintain, can serve us well in confronting our own struggles with radical eschatologies.

SOMMAIRE

La tentation apocalyptique radicale a tourmenté l'Église à toutes les époques depuis le temps des apôtres. Néanmoins, certains moments, comme la crise récente du COVID-19, sont particulièrement propices à de telles tendances. Au XIII^e siècle, Thomas d'Aquin doit affronter des courants apocalyptiques radicaux sur deux fronts : celui des partisans de Joachim de Flore et celui des opposants aux mendiants parmi les prêtres séculiers de l'Université de Paris. Ces confrontations donnent à Thomas d'Aquin l'occasion d'articuler une approche équilibrée de l'eschatologie, enracinée dans l'Écriture et la tradition des Pères. Dans cet article, j'étudie la critique qu'il fait de l'eschatologie radicale dans le contexte d'un examen plus large de sa théologie de l'histoire. L'analyse sobre de Thomas d'Aquin, je le maintiens, peut nous être très utile pour confronter nos propres luttes aux eschatologies radicales.