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The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review, Volume 90, Number 2,
April 2026, pp. 325-343 (Article)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2026.a986044>



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THOMISM, TRADITION, AND THEOLOGY

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THERE HAS BEEN a remarkable revival of interest in medieval and early modern Thomism in the past fifteen years, perhaps in part due to the wider availability of digital texts. Moreover, twentieth-century Thomism is being re-evaluated by theologians and philosophers. This new historical research and reappraisal raise unresolved difficulties concerning the nature of theology as a science, the relationship of theology to philosophy, and the way to understand the history of theology. Two recent books directly address these difficulties.

In *Thomas and the Thomists: The Achievement of Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters*,¹ Romanus Cessario and Cajetan Cuddy present for a broad audience the distinctive features of the Thomist tradition, with particular attention to the Dominican contributors who constitute most, though not all, of its major figures. Although Thomism has never been wholly dominant within Catholic thought, no other single tradition matches its scope or influence. The authors do not merely provide a historical account of Thomas's life and work; they show how he improved the tradition he inherited and how he played the central role in transmitting it to his disciples. They write, "Aquinas and his commentators lay claim to a continuity

¹ Romanus Cessario, O.P., and Cajetan Cuddy, O.P., *Thomas and the Thomists: The Achievement of Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2017).

that dates back at least to his canonization at the start of the fourteenth century, and even earlier.”²

They also explain how this tradition developed through sustained engagement with its critics. John Capreolus (ca. 1380-1444), for instance, shows how Thomas might have responded to a wide range of fourteenth-century philosophers and theologians. Thomas de Vio Cajetan (1469-1534) addresses questions raised by Scotists. Major figures such as Domingo Báñez (1528-1604) and John of St. Thomas (1589-1644) demonstrate how Thomism confronted the challenges of early modern Scholasticism, including those posed by eclectic Jesuit thinkers such as Luis de Molina (1535-1600), Francisco Suárez (1548-1617), and Gabriel Vázquez (ca. 1549-1604).

The spiritual and intellectual flourishing of Thomism continued in seventeenth-century Spain and expanded in France and Italy. Cessario and Cuddy then trace the tradition’s decline (despite some notable figures) in the eighteenth century amid secularizing tendencies and the disruptions of the French Revolution, its survival in smaller pockets during the nineteenth century, and its eventual renewal under Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris*.

Cessario and Cuddy do not attempt an encyclopedic or supposedly neutral history. They argue that Thomism is a living tradition already described by John of St. Thomas as marked by recognizable characteristics: following Thomas’s commentators, loving and extending his doctrine, sharing his insights rather than merely collecting his texts, and adhering to the common interpretations of him. Most importantly, for John of St. Thomas a genuine Thomist accepts not only Thomas’s conclusions but also his demonstrations.³ Thomism is therefore not merely a set of theses but a body of scientific habits that Thomas advanced but did not complete, in part because such habits are always open to growth. Thomists in this tradition cannot merely pluck some ideas from Thomas’s texts and reproduce them in personal essays or popular articles, or as parts of some newer philosophical system.

² Ibid., 129-30.

³ Ibid., 105.

In *The Thomistic Response to the nouvelle théologie: Concerning the Truth of Dogma and the Nature of Theology*,⁴ Jon Kirwan and Matthew Minerd present key documents from the Dominican response to competing accounts of the nature of theology advanced most notably by theologians associated with the “*nouvelle théologie*.”⁵ Kirwan is the foremost Anglophone historian of the *nouvelle théologie*, and Minerd has translated many French Thomistic works into English. These theologians, who were largely Jesuits, sought to distance Thomas from the later Thomistic tradition. Although they understood themselves to be engaging in modern historical scholarship, their deeper aim appears to have been to make Thomas, and more importantly the early Church Fathers, newly relevant to contemporary readers. They held, not without reason, that the technical language of Scholastic theology had become inaccessible to many of their contemporaries. More fundamentally, however, and perhaps without animadversion, they adopted new understandings of the nature of theology and its relation to modern thought. They implicitly relied on views of historical development and human knowledge that diverged from principles shared by earlier Catholic theologians, even if the differences remained largely unarticulated.

The volume edited by Kirwan and Minerd contains two groups of texts, most of them translated into English for the first time here. The first half contains essays by the Toulouse Dominicans connected in various ways with the *Revue thomiste* and with the volume *Dialogue théologique*, as well as other pieces from the *Revue thomiste* that address theological questions raised by the *nouvelle théologie*. This section includes eight articles by three authors: Michel-Marie Labourdette, Raymond-Léopold Bruckberger, and Marie-Joseph Nicolas. Six of the articles are individually authored, and two are jointly written by Labourdette and Nicolas. The second half contains

⁴ *The Thomistic Response to the nouvelle théologie: Concerning the Truth of Dogma and the Nature of Theology*, ed. and trans. Jon Kirwan and Matthew K. Minerd (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023).

⁵ The best history of the movement is Jon Kirwan, *An Avant-Garde Theological Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

seven articles on truth and dogma by a French Dominican theologian in Rome, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange. It also includes his correspondence with Maurice Blondel, with whom he had been disputing amicably for decades about related questions concerning truth. Mindful of the charged atmosphere in post-war French theology, the Toulouse Dominicans deliberately kept Garrigou-Lagrange's more polemical articles out of the *Revue thomiste*.⁶ Unfortunately, the volume does not include texts from the theologians associated with the *nouvelle théologie*. Some of the relevant writings of these theologians have recently been translated in a sourcebook of *ressourcement* theology, but both the translations and the editorial approach in that collection should be treated with caution.⁷

In their introduction, Kirwan and Minerd show how the proponents of the *nouvelle théologie* were remarkably successful in promoting their own self-image among the wider public and eventually among historians of twentieth-century Catholic theology. They also observe that the proponents of the *nouvelle théologie* and Thomists often talked past one another. The history is unedifying: each side rarely addressed the other's central concerns, and the exchange was worsened by the arrogance, or at least the hypersensitivity, of the theologians aligned with the *nouvelle théologie*, whose criticisms of the Thomists were sometimes slanderous. In particular, Henri de Lubac seems to have been particularly harsh, polemical, and accusatory, especially in his description of himself as a victim.⁸ For their part, the Toulouse Dominicans were cautious or even pusillanimous, which hampered their ability to respond effectively.⁹ Surprisingly, one of the most productive engagements was that of Garrigou-Lagrange with Henri Bouillard. Kirwan and Minerd write:

⁶ Kirwan and Minerd, eds., *Thomistic Response*, 34.

⁷ See Jon Kirwan, review of *Ressourcement Theology: A Sourcebook*, by Patricia Kelly (London: T&T Clark, 2021), in *New Blackfriars* 103 (2022): 700-703.

⁸ Jon Kirwan and Matthew K. Minerd, "Introduction," in idem, *Thomistic Response*, 19-22.

⁹ See also Aidan Nichols, "Thomism and the *nouvelle théologie*," *The Thomist* 64, no. 1 (2000): 1-19.

There is no doubt that the brief Garrigou-Bouillard exchange represents a highpoint in this whole affair. Both parties were neither personal nor excessively wide-ranging (as were the Toulouse thinkers at times), and most importantly, they attempted to address the arguments against them directly, without obfuscation or indignation.¹⁰

It also seems to me that the Thomists struggled to respond to opponents who operated from confused and unarticulated assumptions that neither side fully understood.

These two books complement each other and should be read by Thomists and theologians in general. Cessario and Cuddy describe the development of the Thomistic tradition over centuries. The authors of *The Thomistic Response* show how members of this tradition responded to twentieth-century critics of Scholastic theology.

I. THE NATURE OF THEOLOGY

This disagreement between Dominican Thomists and the proponents of the *nouvelle théologie* is primarily a dispute among theologians. Yet it is not always clear what the term “theology” itself denotes. Historical and institutional developments have made it difficult to determine whether modern theologians are engaged in the same activity as Thomas and his medieval successors. Even in the Middle Ages, theologians did not all accept Thomas’s account of theology as a science.¹¹ Nonetheless, medieval universities and houses of study generally required a discipline that was rigorous, philosophically informed, and aimed at theological conclusions that, while grounded in faith, were not themselves articles of faith.

Thomas clearly distinguished between the principles of sacred doctrine and the conclusions demonstratively derived from them. Sacred doctrine proceeds from the principles of faith found in Scripture and from truths known by natural reason. The theologian uses natural reason both to refute those

¹⁰ Kirwan and Miner, “Introduction,” 35.

¹¹ For Cajetan’s defense and development of Thomas’s position, see Gregory Hrynkiw, *Cajetan on Sacred Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020).

who claim that the principles of faith are false and to acquire a habit of understanding conclusions about God. The theologian does not merely believe but also understands what he believes. Consequently, disagreements among theologians are often not about heresy. Thomas, as Cessario and Cuddy note, states that many Scholastic debates are not about citing authorities but instead about understanding doctrines:

There is also a kind of disputation conducted by a master in the schools, not for removing error but for instructing the hearers and leading them to an understanding of the truth he intends. In such cases, one should rely on arguments that investigate the root of the truth and make them know how what is said is true. Otherwise, if the master settles the question by bare authorities, the listener will indeed be assured that this or that is the case, but he will acquire no knowledge or understanding of it and will go away empty.¹²

Theologians aligned with the *nouvelle théologie* frequently accused Dominican Thomists of raising charges of heresy. Those Thomists, in turn, were puzzled by these accusations and did not understand why those aligned with the *nouvelle théologie* would not understand that they were not being criticized for their lack of faith but for error. Nicolas wrote, “We think other certainties than those of faith exist and that merely because a position is not condemnable does not, however, mean it is above criticism.”¹³

The twentieth-century debate was also shaped by nineteenth-century Jesuit Roman theologians such as Giovanni Perrone, who developed what came to be called “positive theology.” This approach arose partly in response to the challenges posed by modern science and new philosophical systems. Although

¹² “Quedam uero disputatio est magistralis in scolis, non ad remouendum errorem, set ad instruendum auditores ut inducantur ad intellectum ueritatis quam credunt, et tunc oportet rationibus inniti inuestigantibus ueritatis radicem: et facientibus scire quo modo sit uerum quod dicitur. Alioquin, si nudis auctoritatibus magister questionem determinet, certificabitur quidem auditor quod ita est, set nichil sciencie uel intellectus acquirat, set uacuu abscedet” (*Quodl.* IV, q. 9, a. 3 [Leonine ed., 25:340]); see Cessario and Cuddy, *Thomas and the Thomists*, 48. Except for citations from *Thomistic Response* and unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

¹³ Nicolas, “Theological Progress and Fidelity to St. Thomas,” in Kirwan and Miner, eds., *Thomistic Response*, 191.

Thomists such as Melchor Cano (1509-60) had long been attentive to the sources of theological principles, earlier theologians primarily focused on clarifying concepts drawn from revelation and on forming judgments and conclusions involving them. By contrast, the nineteenth-century revival of theology emphasized types of authority rather than reasoning and definition. As Charles Shea notes of Perrone's *Praelectiones theologicae*, "the curriculum offered a complete methodology for reflecting in conjunction with the authority of the Church, one that applied in principle to every facet of theological discourse."¹⁴ This emphasis on authority influenced even the nineteenth-century revival of Thomism, in which theologians paid increasing attention to the magisterium and to documents of differing weight. As a result, theological error was often treated less as a defect in reasoning than as a failure of obedience, and proponents of the *nouvelle théologie* tended to interpret conceptual criticisms as implied accusations of disobedience.

An important institutional change was the shift from commentaries and Scholastic treatises to academic journals as the primary venues for theological discussion. In the French intellectual culture of the time, new philosophical ideas were often disseminated through lectures and popular addresses that could be grasped by the educated public. Those associated with the *nouvelle théologie*, even when publishing in scholarly journals, frequently wrote with this broader audience in mind. The *Sources chrétiennes* series, which contained translations of the Fathers, although praised by Labourdette, also raised concerns.¹⁵ It sought to make difficult ancient texts accessible to modern readers lacking the requisite training and operating within a different context.

The Dominican Thomists held that although the proponents of the *nouvelle théologie* professed loyalty to Thomas, they

¹⁴ Charles Michael Shea, "Faith, Reason and Ecclesiastical Authority in Giovanni Perrone's *Praelectiones theologicae*," *Gregorianum* 95 (2014): 162. For the significant contrast with Cano, see 164-167.

¹⁵ Labourdette, "Theology and Its Sources," in Kirwan and Miner, eds., *Thomistic Response*, 133-40.

were no longer practicing theology as Thomas understood it. Theology as a science, in the view of these Thomists, is necessarily restricted to those who have undergone the appropriate Scholastic formation. Bruckberger expresses the point bluntly: “It is forever true that most men are hindered in their pursuit of divine truth either because of their inability to undertake metaphysical reflection, the concerns involved in day to day life, or because of their mental laziness.”¹⁶

The Thomists regarded themselves as belonging to a tradition that continued Thomas’s own work, which was primarily theological science. By contrast, those connected with the *nouvelle théologie* aimed to extract passages from Thomas and, more importantly, from the Fathers, and render them immediately relevant for readers conversant primarily with contemporary culture rather than with Scholastic thought.

This concern with contemporary culture marks an important difference between the *nouvelle théologie* theologians’ rejection of Scholasticism and the similar rejection advanced by the northern humanists of the early sixteenth century.¹⁷ Like the twentieth-century Jesuits aligned with the *nouvelle théologie*, those humanists sought a return to the nontechnical language of the Fathers and to the primary sources of theology, especially Scripture in the original languages. The sixteenth-century Jesuit critique, however, stressed that the growth of knowledge requires increasing terminological precision and more elaborate forms of argumentation. By contrast, the theologians associated with the *nouvelle théologie* advocated a turn to early theological sources because they held that the highly technical vocabulary of later Scholasticism reflected a particular historical and cultural context. They saw Thomistic philosophy as the expression of a culture that was no longer relevant. Jean-Marie Le Blond writes:

¹⁶ Bruckberger, “A Theological Dialogue,” in Kirwan and Miner, eds., *Thomistic Response*, 130. See *ScG III*, c. 4 (Leonine ed., 13:11).

¹⁷ For the sixteenth century, see my “The Early Jesuits and Scholastic Theology,” in Aaron Pidel, Matthew Levering, and Justin M. Anderson, eds., *Ignatius of Loyola and Thomas Aquinas: A Jesuit Ressourcement* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2024), 1-28.

[The Church] seeks, throughout the world, to adapt herself not only to the language but also to the mentality of distant peoples, and she does not fear to see her theology translated not only into foreign words but into foreign concepts. She would be ready, without wishing to impose upon them a terminology or a technique of thought that would repel them, to receive our separated brethren from the Churches of the East and of England or America.¹⁸

For Le Blond, Scholastic terminology is one language among others, and one the Church must be prepared to leave behind in order to speak to other cultures. He does not distinguish between theology and faith, or between theological science and liturgical or catechetical forms. In contrast, Thomists would generally regard adapting theology to a foreign mentality as comparable to adapting mathematics or biology to a foreign mentality.

A further characteristic of those connected with the *nouvelle théologie* was their tendency to read the history of theology as a sequence of systems associated with individual thinkers, systems that can supposedly be surveyed from an independent standpoint. On this view, theology is not a science but a kind of worldview. Bouillard, for example, distinguishes what he regards as Augustinian, Thomist, and Suárezian “systems,” each expressing the same dogmas through different philosophies.¹⁹ We will see how Garrigou-Lagrange thought that Bouillard held a new understanding of what it means for a theological statement to be true.

The dispute between the Thomists and the theologians of the *nouvelle théologie* centered on the nature of theology itself, but the conflict ultimately rested on deeper differences concerning

¹⁸ “Elle cherche, dans l’espace, à s’adapter non seulement au langage, mais à la mentalité des peuples éloignés, et elle ne craint pas de voir sa théologie traduite, non seulement en mots, mais en concepts étrangers. Elle serait prête, sans vouloir leur imposer une terminologie et une technique de pensée qui les rebutteraient, à recevoir nos frères séparés, des Églises d’Orient et d’Angleterre ou d’Amérique” (Jean-Marie Le Blond, “L’analogie de la vérité: Reflexions d’un philosophe sur une controverse théologique,” *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 34 [1947]: 141). See also Jean Daniélou, “Les orientations présents de pensée religieuse,” *Études* 249 (1946): 5-21.

¹⁹ Henri Bouillard, “Notions conciliaires et analogie de la vérité,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 35 (1948): 254-55.

truth, justification, and the history of theology. Although they worked within many of the same institutions—seminaries, Catholic universities, and academic journals—the two groups were engaged in different practices. The Thomists used contemporary academic structures to continue the traditional task of cultivating theology as a science in continuity with earlier Thomists. Those aligned with the *nouvelle théologie*, by contrast, sought to modernize theological discourse and to render it accessible to a broader and less technically trained readership. Yet their program of modernization was grounded in a new understanding of philosophy and of its relation to theology.

II. PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

The theologians associated with the *nouvelle théologie* appear to operate with epistemic and metaphysical assumptions that diverge sharply from those of the Thomistic tradition, even though they rarely articulate these assumptions in systematic form. Their stance reflects a cultural situation in which philosophy has been separated from both Scholasticism and the modern sciences. As a result, their accounts of history, analogy, and truth embody commitments that are incompatible with the classical Aristotelian or Thomistic conception of scientific knowledge and do not correspond to any modern scientific standards.

A first difficulty in analyzing their position lies in their historical context, which includes figures in twentieth-century French philosophy, such as Edouard Leroy, Henri Bergson, and Maurice Blondel, who were highly influential in their own time in France but now are read largely by specialists.²⁰ These thinkers provided ideas that suited the sensibilities of the French reading public but were far less congenial to Scholastic ones, particularly in their reliance on intuition, dynamism, and historical consciousness. These authors are not known for their precision or lasting value. When theologians of the *nouvelle*

²⁰ For their influence on the *nouvelle théologie*, see Kirwan, *Avant-Garde Generation*, 51-68.

théologie drew close to their approach, they in some way simultaneously adopted a historical method that treats theological doctrines primarily as expressions of a wider cultural milieu. This contrasts sharply with the Thomistic view, in which the history of philosophy and theology is analogous to the history of the natural sciences: inquiry moves from general and more certain principles to more determinate conclusions by way of definition and demonstration. As Labourdette observes, "It is easy to note that in our day philosophy has often descended to the level of literature, and thus we ourselves have been led to appreciate it according to the same standards as those holding for poetry and art."²¹ Theology that primarily engaged with, or relied upon, such a philosophical culture, ceased to be theology in the strict sense and became instead a kind of religious rhetoric or, at best, dialectic.

The different approaches to history reflect what it means to follow Thomas. Theologians connected with the *nouvelle théologie* wished to follow Thomas in an attempt to adapt Christianity to modern thought. The contrast becomes particularly clear in their treatments of Thomas's own position in the tradition. They interpret Thomas as mediating historically between competing medieval systems, rather than as articulating doctrinal conclusions grounded in metaphysical truths accessible to reason. They present themselves as standing outside various systems and evaluating these systems in their own setting from a neutral standpoint. For example, Bruno de Solages attempts to reappropriate Thomas as able to mediate between the new ideas of complete Aristotelians such as Siger of Brabant and more conservative Augustinians.²² In order to justify his interpretation, he appeals to historians such as Étienne Gilson, Renan, and Pierre Mandonnet, as well as to the Dominicans at Le Saulchoir and the Franciscans at Quarrachi. According to de Solages's account, thirteenth-century philosophy and theology is best understood as a conflict of systems rather than as a shared scientific inquiry.

²¹ Labourdette, "Theology and Its Sources," 157.

²² Bruno de Solages, "Pour l'honneur de la théologie: Les contre-ses du R.P. Garrigou-Lagrange," *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 48 (1947): 82

In order to interpret theological history as a history of systems that belong to their own historical and cultural periods, the *nouvelle théologie* theologians needed to have some notion of truth and justification different from the standard Aristotelian and Thomistic ones. On their account, different metaphysics, such as those of Thomas and Augustine, lead to different theological formulations which all point to the same truth. In particular, Bouillard and Le Blond rely on some notion of analogy to develop this point.²³ According to them, the various formulations are all affirmations of the same dogmas, but from different systems. They think that analogy explains how this is possible, but they do not provide an account of analogous terms that supports this claim.

The difference between the Toulouse Dominicans and Garrigou-Lagrange is evident in their responses to the way in which Bouillard and Le Blond make use of “affirmations” to support the claim that different systems can converge upon the same truth. Labourdette and Nicolas take an affirmation to be a judgment, and on that basis they devote several pages to articulating the Thomistic account of judgment and truth.²⁴ In contrast, Garrigou-Lagrange states: “But then, I ask, what is *an affirmation* if not the union of a subject and a predicate by means of the verb *to be*. For example: grace is the formal cause of justification; transubstantiation is required by the real presence.”²⁵ In these brief sentences, he exposes the basic problem in Bouillard’s account of affirmation and truth: Bouillard never states what he means by an “affirmation” in the first place.

Behind these notions of history and analogy, there seems to be some notion of truth as connected with action. A system is true insofar as it is relevant to what is done by modern humans. Because these theologians do not make this presupposition explicit, they appear genuinely perplexed by Thomistic objections,

²³ In addition to the cited article by Bouillard, see Le Blond, “L’analogie de la vérité.”

²⁴ Labourdette and Nicolas, “The Analogy of Truth, and the Unity of Theological Science,” in Kirwan and Miner, eds., *Thomistic Response*, 200-203.

²⁵ Garrigou-Lagrange, “Truth and the Immutability of Dogma,” in Kirwan and Miner, eds., *Thomistic Response*, 314.

while Thomists often fail to identify and articulate the precise philosophical principles that are in dispute. The Thomists thought that the *nouvelle théologie* theologians implicitly held false notions of truth. Garrigou-Lagrance was especially concerned about the resemblance between their account of truth and the pragmatic tendencies he had long criticized in Blondel.²⁶ Although he never questioned Blondel's personal faith, he believed that Blondel's understanding of truth would erode the permanence of theological and even dogmatic definitions.

For similar reasons, Garrigou-Lagrance rejects the way these theologians appeal to history. He argues that the history of a science is not simply a record of different "systems," but a movement from error and confusion toward distinctness and truth. Ptolemaic astronomy was not merely one system that was arbitrarily replaced by another; it rested on mistaken hypothetical presuppositions that were later corrected.²⁷ What matters most is the object investigated. Ptolemaic astronomy could be discarded because it relied on false, provisional hypotheses. By contrast, the Scholastic term "formal cause" applied to sanctifying grace is not a provisional hypothesis.

Similarly, Labourdette and Nicolas emphasize that "the ultimate object of our wisdom is not the Augustinianism of St. Augustine, nor the Thomism of St. Thomas, not the mind of any thinker whatsoever. It is the truth itself."²⁸ They also express confusion at the use of analogy by the *nouvelle théologie* theologians. For Thomists, analogy primarily involves the semantic properties of terms, and in particular their related meanings. It does not follow that different theological systems are "analogous" simply because they refer to the same objects and do not have the same meanings. Le Blond, however, connects analogy with a distinction between "logical truth" (truth in the mind) and "ontological truth" (truth as a transcendental), and concludes from the transcendental character of truth that all truth is analogical. In this way he and others

²⁶ For the background, see Kirwan and Miner, "Introduction," 33-39.

²⁷ Garrigou-Lagrance, "On the Immutability of Defined Truths, with Remarks on the Notion of the Supernatural," in Kirwan and Miner, eds., *Thomistic Response*, 346.

²⁸ Labourdette and Nicolas, "Analogy of Truth," 230-31.

attempt to make room for different systems that are true in some analogical way. Labourdette and Nicolas understandably cannot see how this claim is either plausible or relevant, or follows from the theory of analogy.²⁹

More directly than the Toulouse Thomists, Garrigou-Lagrange argues that adherents of the *nouvelle théologie* ultimately deny the Thomistic notion of truth as the adequation of the mind to the thing.³⁰ At first this may seem an obvious point, but after examining the discussions of analogy and truth in Le Blond and Bouillard, we can understand why Garrigou-Lagrange found their statements so difficult to answer. They do not explicitly reject the traditional definition, yet it is unclear how their position can be reconciled with it. Garrigou-Lagrange brings out the oddness of their claims, but he is unable to formulate their view in a way they would recognize as their own. His references to nominalism and to various papal or official statements do little to clarify the issue. For example, he writes, "There is no small danger in setting aside the task of deeply studying St. Thomas's thought, opting instead to read modern philosophers, who like Henri Bergson and many others, are much closer to *nominalism* than to traditional *realism*."³¹ I would note that the *nouvelle théologie* is incompatible with the basic approach of all previous theologians, including that of "nominalists" such as William of Ockham, John Gerson, and Gabriel Biel. The comparison is unhelpful. In fairness to Garrigou-Lagrange, however, the authors of the *nouvelle théologie* seldom articulate their assumptions clearly, and the responsibility for clarification lies chiefly with them. It seems to me impossible to find in their writings a coherent and convincing account of the semantics upon which their arguments depend.

²⁹ Ibid., 199-203.

³⁰ See especially Garrigou-Lagrange, "Truth and the Immutability of Dogma," 305-18.

³¹ Garrigou-Lagrange, "Theology and the Light of Faith," in Kirwan and Miner, eds., *Thomistic Response*, 276-80; "Relativism and the Immutability of Dogma," in Kirwan and Miner, eds., *Thomistic Response*, 366; "On the Immutability of Defined Truths," 349.

III. HISTORY AND THEOLOGICAL PROGRESS

Disagreement between Thomism and the *nouvelle théologie* over theological science and history is perhaps most clearly seen in their understanding of dogmatic development. Since the Thomists distinguish more clearly between the principles of faith and the conclusions of theology, it is helpful to look at their account first.³² According to the Thomists, sacred doctrine can be perfected in two ways. First, there can be progress in the apprehension of terms and the corresponding judgments. The Thomists deny, however, that such progress involves any increase in the content known. The difference concerns the way in which divisions and definitions are made: what was present in a more vague and implicit manner becomes articulated more distinctly and explicitly. This kind of progress pertains chiefly to understanding the sources of the Christian faith, which are primarily Scripture and the articles of the Creed, but also, in a secondary way, the authoritative writers such as the Fathers and later ecclesial documents. This progress can concern the principles of faith, though it is not restricted to them. Disagreement about developments touching these principles often marks the boundary between orthodoxy and heresy.

Second, in contrast to disagreement about the principles of faith, Thomists hold that disagreement in theology at the level of simple apprehension concerns a less essential grasp of the principles and of the conclusions drawn from them; and disagreements about reasoning concern particular conclusions drawn from both the principles of faith and the principles of natural reason. These conclusions do not themselves belong to faith but to theology. Hence disputes between theological schools are disputes not between orthodoxy and heresy but between theological truth and error. Thomists therefore hold that Scotus and Suárez were mistaken without judging them

³² Labourdette, "Theology: Faith Seeking Understanding," in Kirwan and Miner, eds., *Thomistic Response*, 89-125. For the historical issues, see Victor Salas, "Introduction" to *John of St. Thomas [Poinot] on Sacred Doctrine Cursus Theologicus I, Q. 1, Disputation 2*, trans. John P. Doyle (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2023), 11-22.

heretics. Labourdette and Nicolas write, “A theology that is false in many of its conclusions and outlooks can very well coexist with a faith that is objectively identical to that which presides over an entirely true theology.”³³ When criticizing the theologians attached to the *nouvelle théologie*, Thomists were primarily concerned with this kind of error, although they sometimes wished to show that some of the positions, if carried to their conclusions, would lead to more serious error.

Labourdette and Nicolas recognize the importance of historical studies of the sources of theology. But they think that it is important to distinguish between the mental outlooks of the theologians and their theological knowledge.³⁴ According to the Thomists, positive theology’s use of sources and authorities is necessary for ascertaining and clarifying the principles of theology. Speculative theology draws from these principles to a better understanding of the faith. Since no one has a perfect habit of theological science, these two activities are intermingled. Labourdette writes:

Positive theology emerges as being *logically* prior, above all in its first work: the theological observation of the revealed datum currently presented by the Church. *Logically speaking*, speculative theology is a terminal activity, a crowning achievement. However, we know that a science still in the midst of being elaborated . . . there is a continual back-and-forth between observation, on the one hand, and investigation into causes and explanation, on the other.³⁵

Positive theology should lead to speculative theology.

In contrast to the Thomists, theologians associated with the *nouvelle théologie* distinguish less carefully between merely theological conclusions and genuine doctrinal development. They maintain that doctrinal definitions retain their value for all later periods, but they nonetheless prefer the writings of the Fathers because these works are less technical. Moreover, they deny that Scholasticism represents an improvement. Bouillard writes: “To imagine that the Fathers of the Church had only

³³ Labourdette and Nicolas, “Analogy of Truth,” 231.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 228-30.

³⁵ Labourdette, “Theology: Faith Seeking Understanding,” 107.

vague notions, and that only St. Thomas knew how to make them explicit, would be to misunderstand the history of ideas. . . . Each thinker, like each period, has his own intelligibility.”³⁶ This passage incidentally sheds light on how he and his associates criticize straw men, but it also indicates a real disagreement over theological progress. According to Bouillard, Aristotelian technical terms are only one way of grasping a reality, which was understood in other ways by earlier figures and periods. The history of theology in this account appears to concern individual systems more than scientific inquiry. The absence of technical vocabulary makes patristic texts, in this view, more accessible to contemporary readers, whose historical circumstances render Scholastic terminology outdated or even unintelligible. On this account, progress in doctrine often involves the replacement of older conceptual schemes by newer ones. These various systems are said to affirm the same underlying reality, but to do so in different ways.

Because those connected with the *nouvelle théologie* combine this view of theological truth with a particular understanding of historical science, they tend to regard the history of theology as a succession of conceptual schemes that can be traced over extended periods. The differences between these systems concern not primarily truth and error but distinct conceptual frameworks across different nations, historical periods, and even individual thinkers. Yet these theologians often presuppose a standpoint external to these schemes from which the schemes themselves may be evaluated, without, however, explicitly identifying the principles of this standpoint. They do not see themselves as basing their opinions on debatable positions concerning truth and justification. Instead, they think that that they are making Christianity relevant to their contemporaries. As a result, they frequently interpret Thomist efforts to question or clarify their assumptions as accusations of heresy, and little clarity is thereby gained.

³⁶ “S’imaginer que les Pères de l’Église n’ont eu que des notions confuses, et que saint Thomas seul a su les expliciter, ce serait mal comprendre l’histoire des idées. . . . Chaque penseur, comme chaque période, a son intelligibilité propre” (Bouillard, “Notions conciliaires,” 266, cited at greater length in Kirwan and Miner, “Introduction,” 44-45).

CONCLUSION

These two books bring out with clarity many of the issues that remained unaddressed in twentieth-century Catholic thought. Kirwan and Minerd fittingly entitle their introduction “A Dialogue Delayed.” There was an attempted exchange, and perhaps some progress was made in the interaction between Garrigou-Lagrange and Bouillard. But taken as a whole, there was no real dialogue and little common ground. The proponents of the *nouvelle théologie* were quick to accuse the Dominican Thomists of charging them with heresy, and were often unaware of their own commitments regarding truth, the nature of theology, and rational justification. The Dominican Thomist attempts to respond were helpful to the careful reader but ultimately unconvincing both to their opponents and to most of the wider theological public. They rightly pointed to serious difficulties in the other theologians’ accounts of history, analogy, and truth, but they could not make their interlocutors see the relevance of these difficulties.

The failure of the debate stemmed in part from the personalities involved. The proponents of the *nouvelle théologie* were touchy and unwilling to learn from the Thomists; the Toulouse Dominicans were cautious or even pusillanimous; and Garrigou-Lagrange’s approach might appear threatening. More importantly, those associated with the *nouvelle théologie* lacked a clear self-understanding of what they were doing and of the sense in which their approach was genuinely novel. Labourdette and Nicolas perceived that these theologians represented a new kind of challenge not only to Thomism but to all the progress made by medieval and early modern Catholic theology:

How can we fail to see that Thomism finds itself at a critical moment—and along with it, all the traditional theological schools, for none of them would survive its ruin unscathed, existing thereafter on in the form of scattered themes taken up and transformed into brand new intellectual constructions? Is it a gangue to be broken up so that Christian Dogma may thereby be freely extracted therefrom?³⁷

³⁷ Labourdette and Nicolas, “Analogy of Truth,” 239.

The disagreement between Thomists and those attached to the *nouvelle théologie* differed in kind from the long-standing debates between Thomists and Scotists or Suarezians. The latter concerned primarily theological conclusions. The former concerned the very nature and possibility of truth.

In this context, the significance of Thomas and the Thomistic tradition becomes still more evident. Cessario and Cuddy show that Thomists have met new challenges not by extracting isolated theses from Thomas and forcing them into foreign conceptual frameworks, but by refining the meaning of key terms and drawing further conclusions from established principles. It is doubtful that anyone will produce a fully defensible account of the metaphysical and logical assumptions on which the *nouvelle théologie* depends; much of that movement was tied to philosophical currents in European thought that are no longer persuasive. Nevertheless, it seems to me that some of their concerns about history and the nature of rational justification have been raised more clearly by Alasdair MacIntyre and still need to be addressed by Thomists.³⁸

Given our present situation, which is characterized both by renewed familiarity with the Thomistic tradition and by the ever-increasing progress of the particular modern sciences in which contemporary culture excels, it is worth reconsidering what it means for Thomism to grow and develop. The essays translated by Kirwan and Minerd contribute to that inquiry. Both volumes highlight the importance of reading the greatest Thomists and show how they advanced our understanding of the philosophical and theological sciences. They make clear that the major Thomists did not merely repeat Thomas but developed theology and philosophy as genuine sciences. Reading the major Thomists themselves remains the most reliable way to see what Catholic theology, at its best, can still be.

³⁸ See my “MacIntyre and Thomism,” in Ron Beadle and Geoff Moore, eds., *Learning from MacIntyre* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2020), 65-72.