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Fergus Kerr, Thomas Aquinas: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp.ix-127. Price: £7.99. ISBN: 978 0 19 955664 9.

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Thomas Aquinas' surviving tracts demonstrate his prominent and often controversial role in thirteenth century theology and philosophy. He became the most prominent advocate of natural theology and became the father of the Thomistic school. This text, compiled by Kerr, illustrates the significant role that Aquinas' writings play in contemporary debate and their current profound influence on Western Christian thought. Kerr introduces the reader to the historical and social context for Aquinas' writing and explores the Church and culture into which he was born. He also reflects upon the importance of Thomas Aquinas in modern debates and explains why he matters today. This short and general introductory volume makes Aquinas's most popular single work, the *Summa Theologiae*, accessible to a wider readership. This text is part of the *Very Short Introductions* series which began in 1995 with the aim of making a wide variety of topics available to non-specialist and new readers.

The book is divided into six chapters; the first two explore the 'Life and Times' and 'Works' of Thomas Aquinas, the third to fifth analyse the *Summa Theologiae* in its three parts, and the sixth covers aspects of later reception. Throughout the book, Kerr explains the influences on and opposition to the theology of Aquinas whilst expounding the key concepts and controversial issues in an easy to follow and accessible manner. His final section, the impact of Aquinas' 'views on grace and predestination' on the modern world is, perhaps, not quite as successful as it introduces a plethora of philosophical works which the non-specialist reader may be unfamiliar with (p.102-19).

Chapter One, 'Life and Times', focuses mainly on a chronological history of Aquinas. Kerr details each episode in his life and makes reference to the influences upon his actions including the thirteenth century intellectual crisis in the Catholic Church, his family's military tradition, the changing social legislation and power struggle between the Pope (Gregory IX and then Innocent IV) and the Emperor (Frederick II). This

chapter successfully charts his religious career from the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino, to the new university in Naples where he encountered the Dominican order, to which he later became a member, his other numerous travels to Paris and Cologne, his establishment of a study house at Santa Sabina, the Dominican orders Headquarters, and ending at the Cistercian Monastery of Fossanova. Some of the most interesting points Kerr makes in this chapter relate to Aquinas' lack of interest in politics and his few comments on the relationship between Church and State. However, his ethics based upon the concept of 'just war' and his belief that the purpose of law is to make human beings good (ST1/2.95) demonstrate his understanding of the connection between the secular and sacred.

Chapter Two, 'Works', as the title suggests, is limited to the extant texts produced by Aquinas, especially his biblical commentaries. Kerr also highlights the current lack of English translation of some texts and the lack of secondary critical literature to form an analytical and scholarly framework for discussion. The final section explains the orderly structure of the *Summa Theologiae* and its role as a synoptic guide to Christian doctrine, paving the way for the following three chapters.

Chapter Three explores the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*, situating it amongst the top six works in Catholic Christian theology and explaining how such a massive and complex work was created to cater for both advanced scholars and beginners simultaneously. Particularly interesting in this section is Kerr's analysis of Aquinas' theology and the discussion of its reliance on ancient philosophers rather than original thinking. The explanations given of the relationship between good and evil, the notion that we know about God through his creations and the revelation of grace and natural reasoning provide a brief and somewhat simplistic interpretation of the key element of the *Summa Theologiae*.

Chapter Four focuses on the second part of this text. It details the importance of laws, actions, motivations and justice on the human social and spiritual condition. This chapter would benefit from further explanation as it contains a wealth of interesting ideas that are worthy of greater development. These include the notions that sin is an action which goes against reason, mankind needs laws to govern behaviour (natural, human, mosaic and New Testament laws) and the importance of

justice, when each individual is rendered their due (whether social, private or political).

Chapter Five considers the third and final part. It debates the new relationship created with God through the unity of the divine and human within Christ and questions the appropriateness of the incarnation, the manifestation of the unseen God in visible form. The final section provides an all too brief summary of some of the key arguments of Aquinas' that are currently relevant, including the Catholic Church's resistance to ordain women priests. Aquinas justifies this by claiming that women have no leadership qualities in the natural order.

The final chapter focuses on the legacy of the *Summa Theologiae*, especially its transformation from a controversial text which had several propositions condemned and other sections declared heretical to becoming a principal text in Roman Catholic colleges. This drastic shift is described as occurring due to Aquinas' ability to equip the church with the intellectual weaponry necessary to re-think Christianity in terms of modern thought. The plethora of works and theories that have descended from the *Summa Theologia*, including the theory of human rights, the conditions for just war, the importance of justice, and the notion of 'just price' used in economic theory, have made this text one of the most influential in shaping current Christian thinking.

Overall Kerr's book provides a useful introduction to the literature and social context of Aquinas and a brief insight into the later reception of his works. However, its usefulness to a complete beginner with little knowledge of theology is limited due to the assumption that the reader has some familiarity with the *Summa Theologiae*. Conversely its usefulness to the professional is hampered by its somewhat basic approach.