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Meister Eckhart and the Controversial Corrections of Aquinas

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In December the skies over Paris turn cold and gray with an icy rain that chills the bones and presses down upon the human spirit. It is in such contrast to summer when the sun makes the days long and the air warm. This was no less true in the winter of 1270 when Etienne Tempier, the Bishop of Paris issued an edict condemning 13 Aristotelian and Averroist propositions. What is more is that this edict excommunicated, cast out of the Church those who continued to support these heresies. It was an attack born of fear, fear that these new ideas which had sprouted up at the great university were corrupting the Christian faith. Implicated in these allegations, among others, was the up-and-coming Dominican thinker named Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas was already well respected by his Order and his teacher Albert the Great held him in high regard. Thomas did not allow this wintry wind of fear to kill the shoots of truth rising green, so he risked the condemnation, risked the despairing winter of ignorance for the promising Sun of Truth, the very icon of the man. Over the next two years Aquinas sought to counteract this fear that had chilled the warm ways of learning, and he did this as he knew best, by pursuing the truth of the matter. Thomas conducted a series of *disputations* that were meant to demonstrate the integrity of Aristotle in doing the task of theology. Without going into details, people feared that this heretical influence placed the human intellect in too high an order, seeming to deny the will's obedience to faith alone. Thomas's lectures or disputations focused on the virtues, this question of human moral excellence. First he treated virtues in general in *De virtutibus in communi*, next he looked at the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance in *De virtutibus cardinalibus* and finally, but most importantly he examined the virtue of hope in *De spe*. It was this stress on the human person who thinks and wills that unsettled the Voluntarists.

When Aquinas left Paris to return to his home province of Naples, no one thought that he would be dead in just two year's time. So after his tragic death in 1274, one of the Dominican Order's greatest minds could no longer argue his case for Aristotle. The Bishop of

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Paris, seeking to close the case on heresies at the university issued a second condemnation. Three years after Aquinas's death this second condemnation included 219 heretical propositions of which 20 clearly belonged to Thomas Aquinas. Bishop Tempier's 1277 condemnation at Paris was matched, and I say this with regret, was matched by the Dominican Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Kilwardby. Kilwardby had studied and taught at Paris before becoming Regent at Oxford University and later the first Dominican prelate of England, so his condemnation of 30 Thomistic propositions was a blow to the cause of Aquinas. Amid these unfortunate turns there was a chapter of history taking shape that is known as the *Correctorium* Controversy. This article will explore the Dominican Order's defense of Thomas Aquinas and the role Meister Eckhart may have played in that controversy.[1]

The year was 1264, ten years before Aquinas' death, the Dominican Order had just elected John of Vercelli, a capable canon lawyer, to be Master and the 6th successor to St. Dominic. He succeeded the reforming generalate of Humbert of Romans, who at the 1263 London General Chapter resigned due to poor health after nine years as Master. Master John served almost twenty years, roughly paralleling the ambitious reign of Charles of Anjou. John is described in the Bordeaux Codex as a person of "great prudence and industry."[2] During this time the Order witnessed the election of the first Dominican Pope in 1276, Innocent V (an honor not bestowed upon the Franciscans until 1288 with the election of Nicholas IV). However, the first Dominican pope sadly died just 6 months later, succeeded by the Anjou candidate Pope Adrian V, who died two months later, followed by the 8 month pontificate of John XXI. I take the trouble to recount these facts only to highlight the impact actions at Paris and Oxford would have given the absence of strong papal politics.

The English Franciscan, William of Mare, had been a Master at Paris in 1275 following Bonaventure and the Augustinian School. When he returned to England in 1278, he catalogued what he considered errors in Aquinas's doctrines and wrote the *Correctorium fratris Thomae* (or the "*Corrective of Brother Thomas*"), hence the name *Correctorium* Controversy. In light of the Paris and Oxford condemnations and the correctives of William, the 1278 Dominican general chapter of Milan was obliged to counter these attacks and

[1] This article was delivered at Blackfriars, Oxford as part of the Aquinas Institute lectures May 21, 2009. It develops part of an earlier talk given at the *Sixteenth Annual Conference of the Eckhart Society* (2003), "Explanatory Shards of the Incarnation in Eckhart's Parisian Questions," printed in the *Eckhart Review* (2004) 5–23.

[2] *Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica* vol. III (Rome, 1898) p. 122. [This same volume is also known as the *Acta Capitulorum Generalium*, 1220–1303, vol. 1.] Hereafter MOPH.

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appointed Raymond Medullione and John Vigoroux as "visitators" to the English Dominican Province. These men were both lectors at Montpellier where a university had been since 1220 and a Dominican convent was thriving by 1250. Both men may have likely been canon lawyers and they were given extensive powers to redress the scandal through punishment, banishment and loss of office.[3] The following year, in 1279, the Dominican general chapter of Paris took a more drastic step and legislated against attacks on Aquinas throughout the Order.[4] As if in response, the Franciscan chapter held at Strasbourg in May 1282 adopted William's "corrections," decreeing, as Mark D. Jordan[5] recounts, "the *Summa* of Thomas was not to be read in Franciscan houses except by '*lectores rationabiliter intelligentes'* and then only when accompanied by the 'declarations' of William."[6]

Why was there this tension among the friars especially given the fact that in 1255 the Dominican Master Humbert of Romans and the Franciscan Minister General John of Parma jointly exhorted the two orders to work together? This joint appeal was repeated by John of Vercelli and the Franciscan Jerome of Ascoli in 1274, this time, as David Burr recounts, going so far as to forbid any "inflammatory actions including argument(s) about the relative perfection of the two orders."[7] What made these two Orders lock horns? Well, it is important for us to realize that Aquinas, and his use of Aristotle, was not accepted by all, not even all the Dominicans. Elizabeth Lowe's 2003 work *The Contested Theological Authority of Thomas Aquinas: The Controversies between Hervaeus Natalis and Durandus of St. Pourçain*[8] offers a very complete study of this Dominican internal debate on Aquinas, compounded by Franciscan criticisms. But the Dominicans were not alone in facing new realities as a young Order, and as much as the Dominicans struggled so too the Franciscans had their own internal crisis.

David Burr[9] sees the *Correctorium* controversy as linked to another struggle of the time, one that haunted the Franciscans. It involved the Franciscan Friars in a fierce debate concerning an understanding of

[3] MOPH III p. 199.

[4] MOPH III, p. 204.

[5] Mark D. Jordan's article "The Controversy of the *Correctoria* and the Limits of Metaphysics" traces the late thirteenth century struggle between anti-Thomist and Thomist in *Speculum* 57/2 (1982):292–314.

[6] *Speculum* 57: 293. Jordan cites the 1942 article by Maur Burbach, "Early Dominican and Franciscan Legislation Regarding St. Thomas," *Mediaeval Studies* 4, 139–48.

[7] "The *Correctorium* Controversy and the Origins of the *Usus Pauper* Controversy" *Speculum* 60/2 (1985): 337.

[8] Elizabeth Lowe, *The Contested Theological Authority of Thomas Aquinas: The Controversies between Hervaeus Natalis and Durandus of St. Pourçain 1307–1323* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[9] *Speculum* 60/2 (1985): 331–342.

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poverty known as the *Usus Pauper* controversy. In one sense this was an internal struggle on the part of the Franciscans as they faced new realities and questions about the meaning of apostolic poverty, about the friars owning nothing. Conflicts between lax and rigorist interpretations plagued the Franciscans and Minister Generals for decades. Peter John Olivi and the Spiritualist Franciscans rejected the notion that one could live the vow of poverty distinguishing between the Order's use of things, while claiming not to own them. This was critical to the future of the Franciscans. If the emerging order was to be of real service to the Church and the pope, it needed the necessary resources to achieve its mission. Yet the spirit of St. Francis and the poverty of Christ made it difficult to accept ownership of any kind. So the Franciscans were facing a kind of identity crisis. The debate came to be centered on a Franciscan understanding of the vows. The consequences of opposing interpretations by the Church, and in particular Thomas Aquinas's critique of any vows that bind one under sin, seemed to aggravate the Franciscan struggle all the more. Aquinas held a more benign notion of the vows, as can be seen in his Summa.

> He who professes a rule does not vow to observe all the things contained in the rule, but he vows the regular life . . . Hence in certain religious orders precaution is taken to profess, not the rule, but to live according to the rule, i.e. to tend to form one's conduct in accordance with the rule as a kind of model; and this is set aside by contempt. Yet greater precaution is observed in some religious orders by professing obedience according to the rule . . . (II-II Q. 186, art. 9, ad. 1)

Clearly Thomas believed that the Dominican Order had the better understanding, for he goes on to say:

> There is also a religious order, that of the Friars Preachers, where such like transgressions or omissions do not, by their very nature, involve sin, either mortal or venial; but they bind one to suffer the punishment affixed thereto, because it is in this way that they are bound to observe such things. Nevertheless they may sin venially or mortally through neglect, concupiscence, or contempt. (*ibid.*)

David Burr's article is an excellent look at the motives that gave rise to William of Mare's work but for this article I must move on to the events that drew Eckhart into its drama.

Major Dominican efforts during this time, which sought to defend Thomas's orthodoxy, stem from the English Dominicans in response to Archbishop Robert Kilwardby's condemnation of 1277 (and perhaps the persuasion of the general chapter's two visitators). The activities of an emerging Dominican leadership, set out to promote Aquinas and in turn the Order's service to the Church. Two English provincials were great promoters of Aquinas, William Hotham, later named Archbishop of Dublin (1296–98) and Thomas of Jorz

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who was confessor to Edward I and later Cardinal of Santa Sabina. Elizabeth Lowe tells us that "between 1280 and 1283, [Dominican Master General] John of Vercelli directed Galieno of Orte, then a lector in Italy, to excerpt and condense Thomas' *Secunda secundae*" (p.63). This section of the Summa was the most problematic for the opponents of Aquinas and required closer study by Dominicans defending him. We see a number of works by Dominicans appearing which cleverly were dubbed the *Correctoria corruptii*, "corrections of the corruptions" of William Mare. Two such works surface in 1283, both from Oxford, the *Quare* which was very likely the work of Richard Knapwell, an Oxford Dominican and master of theology (or possibly but doubtfully Thomas Sutton, another Oxford Dominican)[10] and the *Sciendum* which was prepared by Robert Orford.

Sometime between 1283–84, soon after these two Oxford defenses appeared, we see the work by John Quidort of Paris, known as the *Circa*. This was followed in England by William Macclesfield's defense, the *Quaestione,* which appeared early in 1284. Here we see four works, intent on defending the program of Thomas Aquinas. The fact that all appear within less than two years suggests a planned effort on the part of the Dominicans. The defense of Aquinas, it seems, could certainly be considered an issue of the day deserving of disputation.

In late 1284 the Franciscan John Peckham (now Archbishop of Canterbury) renewed his predecessor's Oxford condemnation. William of Mare also renewed his attacks on Aquinas. Even Richard Knapwell, one of Aquinas's defenders, would end up being charged with heresy in 1286 by Archbishop Peckham. In the end Knapwell would have to appeal his case to the Pope, but this demonstrates just how contentious the issue had become. We see that the stakes were mounting and in 1286 the Dominican capitulars in Paris decided to actively promote the thought of Thomas Aquinas, mandating that all masters, bachelors, and priors were to defend Aquinas.[11] Amid such debate at various levels of the Church and University we find our last defender, Rambert of Primadizzi from Bologna. His work, *Apologeticum veritatis*, was written in Paris between the end of 1286 and late 1288.[12] A battle was being fought for a new way of thinking

[10] Jordan, 294. A valuable piece on Thomas Sutton is by Gyula Klima of Fordham University, "Thomas of Sutton on the Nature of the Intellective Soul and the Thomistic Theory of Being", Aertsen, J. et al. (eds.), *Nach der Verurteilung von 1277. Philosophie und Theologie an der Universität von Paris im letzten Viertel des 13. Jahrhunderts, Studien und Texte* (Miscellanea Mediaevalia 28), Walter de Gruyter, Berlin−New York 2001, pp. 436–455. Another valuable work is his paper, "Thomas Sutton and Henry of Ghent on the Analogy of Being" delivered at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 2–5, 2002, Kalamazoo, MI

[11] MOPH III, p. 235.

[12] Jordan, 293–96.

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and this was to be most demonstratively true of the friars at the University of Paris.

Soon after the 1286 general chapter at Paris we see an interesting collection of pro-Aquinas Dominicans taking shape at Paris itself. In 1289–90 Robert Orford is incepted at Paris. 1292 Rambert of Primadizzi begins his first inception at Paris. The following year, 1293, John Quidort is a reader of the Sentences at Paris as is Meister Eckhart, all of these men were being groomed as Master theologians. And just at the end of the thirteenth century William Macclesfield arrived at Paris in 1298 followed by the Italian Rambert of Primadizzi and his second stay in 1299. Without a doubt the Dominicans were marshaling their forces to defend the brilliance of their own Thomas Aquinas, and Paris provided the best stage for this defense. Here we come to my question, "Why was Eckhart sent to teach at Paris? Is it fair to see his assignation to Paris at this time in the context of this pro-Thomist movement?

After having completed his studies in Cologne, Eckhart was sent to Paris in 1293, where he lectured on the Sentences of Peter Lombard until 1294 as had John Quidort. From Paris Eckhart went to Erfurt to be Prior and vicar general of Thuringia until he was made a Master at Paris. Meister Eckhart was sent back in 1302, now as a Master at the University of Paris occupying the external Dominican chair *magister actu regens*, which was a prestigious post. Hervaeus Natalis, a staunch pro-Aquinas Dominican, was also lecturing on the Sentences at Paris from 1301–1303. This period marks Eckhart's first Parisian stay as *magister* and it is during this period that Eckhart delivered the first two disputed questions. If we keep in mind that these questions were meant to engage critical issues of the day, then they must be read in a social context. It is in this context of a heightened concern for Augustinian orthodoxy and the Dominican Order's legislated support of Aquinas that Eckhart delivers the first two of his *Parisian Questions*. These questions were disputations or public lectures at the university that were meant to debate key issues of the day. We have five such questions in the Kohlhammer critical edition of Eckhart's German and Latin works, but only four are Eckhart's own text. Question three is a summary of Eckhart's position by the Franciscan Master Gonsalvo. I will treat only those questions that are Eckhart's own and set aside Gonsalvo's summary. In the past these questions had been seen as nothing more than a scholastic exercise. They were not included in either volume of the Classics of Western Spirituality series and treated briefly by Frank Tobin,[13] Robert Forman,[14] and Bernard McGinn.[15] While an English translation by

[13] *Meister Eckhart* (Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press, 1986) pp. 35–7.
[14] *Meister Eckhart: Mystic as Theologian*. (Rockport, MA: Element, 1991) p. 46.
[15] *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroads, 2001) pp. 4–5.

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Armand Maurer[16] exists, none of the research sees these Parisian Questions in light of the pro-Aquinas context. However, when seen in the context of the Dominican Order's "correcting the corruption of Brother Thomas" the *Parisian Questions* stand in a different light. Consequently, our understanding of the concerns for Aquinas help us appreciate the significance of Eckhart's Parisian Questions. The 1302 questions that Eckhart addresses seem to us in the twenty-first century very esoteric at first glance. They are: *"Whether Existence and Understanding are the same in God?"* and *"Whether Angelic Understanding, as indicating action, is its Existence?"*. So, it is fair to ask how these topics were issues of his day, true disputed questions? The answer, I argue, may be found in the Dominican Order's promotion of Thomas Aquinas's thought and the challenges presented by the Franciscans, among others.

As to these first two questions, it is fair to say that key to Aquinas's thought is his notion of God's *esse* or beingness. Thomas's teaching on this can be found in *On Being and Essence (De Ente et Essentia),* one of Aquinas' earliest works. It was written when Thomas was around 30 and his intended audience was his own community, the Dominican friars at Saint-Jacques. His purpose was to help them better understand Aristotle's thought in theology, *sacra doctrina*.[17] It was a work influenced by the Arab thinker Ibn Sina (Avicenna) who in turn was interpreting the pagan philosophy of Aristotle. While I cannot fully address the significance of this work, the Dominican Medievalist James Weisheipl described it as "widely popular" and "extant in more than 179 manuscripts." This work, he said was "an expository work in metaphysics wherein most of Thomas's fundamental ideas in philosophy are expressed clearly." Of particular relevance for us regarding Eckhart is that this little treatise was one of the "first works of Thomas to be commented upon by later Thomist."[18] *On Being and Essence* would have been considered an apt introduction for Dominican's eager to better understand Aquinas[19] and a valuable resource for Dominicans, like Eckhart, at Saint-Jacques. However, it was also one of the works attacked by another German Dominican named John of Metz, so this conflict was internal to the Order as well. Consequently, I believe that these first two *Parisian Questions* are in part motivated by Eckhart's response to this and the Franciscan "corrections" of Thomas, to his appreciation

[16] Maurer, A. ed. and trans. *Parisian Questions and Prologues* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1970).

[17] The excellent work by James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino. His Life, Thought, and Works* (Catholic University of America Press, 1983) includes a valuable summary of Aquinas's works. See p. 386.

[18] Weisheipl, p. 78–9.

[19] I recommend Anthony Kenny's *Aquinas on Being* (Oxford University Press, 2002) for those desiring a fuller explanation.

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of Aquinas' *De Ente et Essentia,* and his obligation to defend his esteemed brother. This controversial context would remain a reality at Paris, even after Eckhart's return to Saxony as Provincial of this new province.

From 1303 to 1311 Eckhart or Aycardus as his name appears in the documents, plays a significant role in the Order as Provincial of Saxony. Eckhart would have been at the General Chapter of Toulouse in May 1304 that elected Aymeric of Piacenza as the twelfth successor to St. Dominic. Aymeric's generalate set out to regulate studies in provinces where elements opposed Aquinas. He defined the qualifications for degrees in the Order, especially for study at Paris. The 1307 Chapter at Strasburg removed the Bohemian Provincial and named Eckhart vicar general over the Bohemian Province with the same reforming powers *in capite et in membris* we saw given the two Visitators sent to England by the 1278 chapter, but Eckhart was the principal deputy of the of the Master General Aymeric and he had full authority ("*plenariam potestatem"*) to act as he saw fit. In 1308 the French province elected Hervaeus Natalis as their provincial. Natalis had been at Paris with Eckhart and was a fierce defender of Aquinas. He and other pro-Aquinas provincials like Barnaba Cagnoli of Lombardy, and I believe like Eckhart, were at the 1309 General Chapter of Saragossa that required lectors and their assistants "to lecture and determine questions according to the teaching of Thomas Aquinas."[20] As I said, Natalis was a strong supporter of Aquinas and it strikes me as odd that if Eckhart were not of the pro-Thomist movement Natalis would have included Eckhart in his attacks, as he had done to two other Dominicans, James of Metz and Durandus of Saint-Pourçain.

In Naples the Dominican chapter of 1311, which absolved Eckhart as Provincial and again sent him to Paris to teach, also sent another German, *fr. Theodoricum de provincia Saxonie*. This last move is puzzling. I am curious as to the identity of this person as it may be referring to Theodoric or Dietrich of Freiburg, who generally has not been known as a supporter of Aquinas, but it must be said that he was not opposed to the use of Aristotle. Theodoric had been appointed vicar-general of the Teutonian province (southern Germany) in 1310 when the previous general chapter absolved the Teutonic provincial and sent him to Paris to teach. If it is this Theodoric, why were the 1311 capitulars now sending him to Paris? Was Theodoric under obedience to support the cause of Aquinas? Or might he and Eckhart suggest another wing of the pro-Thomist effort moderated by the thought of Albert the Great? Theodoric of Freiburg is thought by most scholars to have died after 1310, so even

[20] Lowe, 76, also MOPH III p. 38.

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if he lived to late 1311 it seems unlikely that he would have gone to Paris.[21]

Regardless of the climate, or the political constitution of the Dominican faculty at Paris, it is during this second Parisian stay in 1312 that Eckhart addressed *Question Four* asking, *"Whether motion that is without an end implies contradiction?"* Again a seemingly esoteric question but one generated by Aristotle's *Physics VI* and here Eckhart follows Aquinas.[22] The question of motion not only pertains to physical objects but also to the actualization of potentiality as well. This is a question that could impact the moral motion of the human agent. Recall Aquinas' criticism of rigorous religious vows that bind under mortal sin but are impossible to realize. (For more on this concept of motion I recommend Simon Oliver's 2005 study *Philosophy, God and Motion* published by Routledge.) Eckhart also addressed *Question Five* sometime before 1314 which asked *"Whether the elemental forms remained in Christ's body while he was dying on the cross?" Question Five* is of interest in that the Dominican chapter of 1313 held at Metz again exhorted Dominicans to defend the thought of Thomas Aquinas.[23] Weisheipl's observation on Aquinas sheds more light. He points out that "in the fifty years following Thomas's death the crucial issue was not the real distinction between essence (*quod est*) and existence (*esse*), as might be expected, but the unicity of substantial form."[24] This too had consequences for an understanding of the unicity of the moral agent. In both of these questions Eckhart follows Aquinas and I am inclined to ask if a contributing factor to them might be found in Durandus of Saint Pourçain. Durandus' contentious conflict with the Dominican faculty at St. Jacques had been broiling the past four years, preventing his inception as *magister* (Lowe, 71–5). This allows one to question its influence upon Eckhart's questions on both the related themes of motion in question four and on substantial forms in question five.

In this article my purpose has been to open a door, a door that had been hidden behind the prevalent interpretations on the thought of Meister Eckhart. Given the Dominican Order's efforts to promote the thought of Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart's role and significant service to the Order as provincial of Saxony, as visitator for the Bohemian Province, and as vicar in Strasbourg to Master Berengar Landor,

[21] I recommend Kurt Flasch's work *Von Meister Dietrich zu Meister Eckhart* (Hamburg : Meiner, 1984) in the series *Corpus philosophorum Teutonicorum Medii Aevi*; and William A. Wallace's *The scientific methodology of Theodoric of Freiberg; a case study of the relationship between science and philosophy* (Fribourg, Switzerland, University Press, 1959).

[22] For a complete study of motion and Aquinas's understanding see Simon Oliver's *Philosophy, God and Motion* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[23] MOPH III pp. 64–5.

[24] Weisheipl p. 338.

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it is difficult to say that Eckhart was opposed to this pro-Thomist program. During his years at Paris, all of Eckhart's known *Questions* can be seen as responding to his Order's legislation and as treating key topics in Aquinas's thought. The Order's pro-Thomist response to the *Correctorium Controversy* offers us a more engaging way to read the *Parisian Questions* and to see Eckhart as part of the Order's efforts to defend Aquinas. Too often Eckhart's Thomistic strands have been dismissed or ignored. It is difficult to believe that so brilliant a mind like Eckhart, one so respected by his Order, would have been sent twice to Paris at a time when the Order was promoting Aquinas. It was almost a century after his birth that the Dominican Order began to appropriate the genius of his thought. Soon after Aquinas' death popular devotion swelled in Italy and in 1317 the Sicilian Dominican Province began to promote Thomas for canonization. I have no doubt that the efforts both to canonize the man on the one hand and to condemn him on the other gave rise to differing interpretations of Aquinas' thought. This is why I believe it is important that in examining Eckhart's "Thomistic" influence we not define it too narrowly. Given the likely fact that the interpretations of Aquinas were still fluid, it is fair to ask if Eckhart and Dietrich suggest a Rhineland use of Aquinas alongside those of Oxford, Paris, and the friars in Sicily.

As I said, my purpose in this paper has been to open a door into an under-explored aspect of Eckhart's thought. I have demonstrated the plausibility of reading Eckhart in a Thomistic light. In a sense I put forth a possible corrective to our study of Eckhart. What remains is for others to cross the threshold and bring their expertise to this project. Is it not fair to ask if there were a Rhineland School of Thomism taking shape in people like Albert, Eckhart and Dietrich? Crossing this threshold takes us back, before *Aeterni Patris*, before the Iberian School, before Thomas Cardinal Cajetan. Time will tell if such an excursion has value but my hope is that this initial venture prods renewed interest in the study of Eckhart and Aquinas.

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