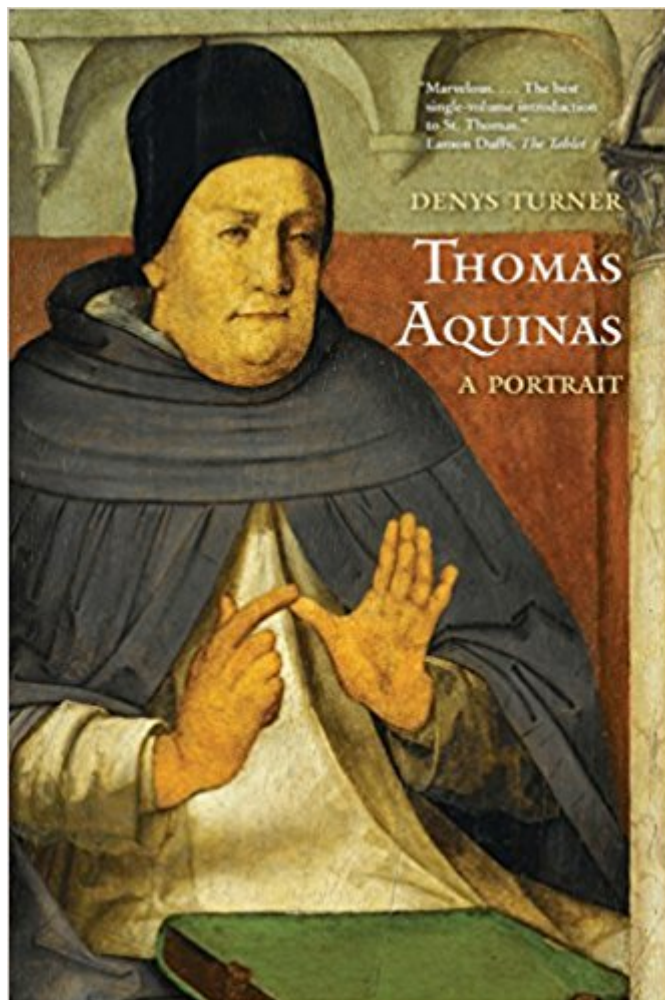


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# Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait



## Synopsis

A concise and illuminating introduction to the elusive Thomas Aquinas, the man and the saint. Leaving so few traces of himself behind, Thomas Aquinas seems to defy the efforts of the biographer. Highly visible as a public teacher, preacher, and theologian, he nevertheless has remained nearly invisible as man and saint. What can be discovered about Thomas Aquinas as a whole? In this short, compelling portrait, Denys Turner clears away the haze of time and brings Thomas vividly to life for contemporary readers—those unfamiliar with the saint as well as those well acquainted with his teachings. Building on the best biographical scholarship available today and reading the works of Thomas with piercing acuity, Turner seeks the point at which the man, the mind, and the soul of Thomas Aquinas intersect. Reflecting upon Thomas, a man of Christian Trinitarian faith yet one whose thought is grounded firmly in the body's interaction with the material world, a thinker at once confident in the powers of human reason and a man of prayer, Turner provides a more detailed human portrait than ever before of one of the most influential philosophers and theologians in all of Western thought.

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## Customer Reviews

“... if you require an introduction to the ‘Angelic Doctor’, Turner’s magnificent book will serve you well.” BBC History Magazine (BBC History Magazine 2014-12-01)

Leaving few traces of his personal life behind, Thomas Aquinas has long stymied the efforts of

biographers. Undeterred, master teacher Denys Turner uncovers revealing details about the elusive saint and achieves an illuminating new portrait. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I have two shelves of books by and on Aquinas, and when I bought this I expected to learn nothing new but to get a different insight into him. I was not disappointed on either score. Turner shocked me a bit when, early on, he deemed Aquinas a materialist. What he means by this is not the current philosophy of materialism born of logical positivism (the scientific method), which holds as foundational that the only reality is material reality, that there is no such dimension as the spiritual, or if there is, we cannot know about it. Aquinas' materialism is not that kind of materialism. Dr Turner explains that Aquinas' materialism is based on the reality of matter and that it is knowable, knowable because of abstraction which is per se nonmaterial in essence. He also maintains that Aquinas does not denigrate matter, as do the Platonists and such. Matter is good, matter has its own value. Humans are body and soul, matter and spirit, and the body has its value and meaning. Aquinas never maintains, as do many philosophers of bygone ages, and a lot of "spiritualities" of the present, that the body is wretched and of no count, that the soul is entrapped in the body like a bird in a cage, and yearns to be free. No, for Aquinas, and for Aristotle whose philosophy he uses and builds upon, the body is an essential part of what it is to be humans. We do not shed our bodies at death and "become angels." We are not angels entrapped in a body. More, while the nonmaterial soul (spirit) of a person survives death--defined as separation of body and soul, matter and spirit, material cause and formal cause--that surviving soul, spiritual and therefore incapable of decomposing, continues to exist as an immortal substance but is not a person. The reason? Aquinas says that a human person is matter, the body, "informed" by the soul, which defines man's nature as a rational animal. Upon death, the soul continues to exist, but not as a person. Only at the general resurrection when God reunites the souls of all those who ever lived with their bodies in some fashion known only to Him, is the person that we are reconstituted. Dr Turner offers a fresh insight into the principles upon which Aquinas constructed his philosophy, a philosophy which he clearly states is handmaiden to revealed truth of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It is delightful to see a small but brilliant number of philosophers returning to Aquinas; as G.K. Chesterton said, Aquinas is the philosopher of common sense, appealing to the common man. For Aquinas, matter is reality, the spiritual world is reality and knowable through the material world around us as detected by the five senses and processed through the material brain by the immortal substance that is our soul, or in the words of Aquinas, what "forms" the matter of our bodies to be human. The price is extremely

reasonable. The field of Aquinas is populated with books, most of them of specialist nature and expensive to boot. This one is not. I highly recommend it and in the future I intend to re-read it, for this book is a mine of insights that one reading alone will not exhaust.

As with Turner's other books, this is quite elegantly written, and with depth. Much of the book reflects Turner's long-standing interest in the apophatic tradition -- he stresses more than almost anyone else I have read the refusal of Aquinas to make certain claims about God, and the pressures on language at the limit that Aquinas acknowledges. The book is particularly good at separating Aquinas' theology from various debased versions (Catholic and Protestant and atheist). Much of the first two thirds of the book would be intriguing to a non-believing philosopher -- the discussions of the implications of an Aristotelian approach to (for instance) the characteristics of an intellectual animal are of general interest -- it is only towards the end that specifically Christian theology (belief in the uniqueness of Christ, etc.) appears. There is not much here on the Trinity (Turner gets started on it, and then stops), and nothing on the subsequent history of Aquinas' influence. The book is quite dense in its way -- it would not be a good starting point for someone who knew nothing about medieval or Christian theology generally.

Denys Turner reveals himself in this book as a deep philosopher and theologian. I am pretty familiar with the thought of Thomas Aquinas, starting to study him some 50 years ago. This book shows many aspects of Thomas's thought which are not well understood by many scholars. Highly recommended!

I was looking for high-quality reading on St. Thomas that would get into greater depth (although perhaps with less wit) than, for instance, Chesterton's "Dumb Ox" but still be engaging, and not require me to read the entire Summa-- I am no academic, after all. This was recommended to me by a Ph.D. candidate whose judgment I greatly trust in book recommendations. I purchased the ebook because this is the sort of book that needs to be very portable due to the depth of its subject. I need to take every opportunity to go back over various passages and reflect on them, so I need to be able to search and navigate through the passages I have highlighted. I originally read it on Kindle for PC, but having it available in the Kindle app on my phone as well is indispensable. This does a really excellent job of, to paraphrase the author, not trying to force St. Thomas into our heads, because St. Thomas's outsize genius doesn't fit completely into our heads, but rather helping us fit our heads inside St. Thomas's genius. This is a book I will never truly finish because it merits

referring back to again and again to better understand various points of St. Thomas's thought. This started out as "cover-to-cover" reading, and I did make it all the way to the last page, but now it has become an essential reference that I refer back to again and again.

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