In a recent book, Robert Pasnau uses the Council of Vienne to demonstrate the pernicious influence of doctrinal declarations on the practice and vitality of medieval philosophy:

The censures of 1270–1347 demarcate the outer limits of debate for the duration of the scholastic era. In general, as time wore on, these limits came to be so entrenched as to be internalized in the minds of scholars, their basis in Church doctrine no longer needed to be mentioned. Consider the Council of Vienne. In 1278, Peter John Olivi thought himself free to question whether the soul is the form of the body. This was, after all, a doctrine that had been dominant in the Latin West for only a few decades. In general, remarks Olivi of Aristotle, “his authority, like that of any infidel and idolater, is nothing to me” (Summa II.16; I:337). Yet after Olivi’s views on the soul were condemned at Vienne in 1312, it became impossible to follow his lead in this matter. Accordingly, when in subsequent years authors such as Henry of Harclay, John of Jandun, and Peter Auriol take up the question of how the soul stands to the body, they go along with the standard hylomorphic analysis, but make it clear that they are doing so purely on the basis of faith, and stress that they do not think the doctrine can be proved. Eventually, however, the Aristotelian analysis came to be taken for granted, as beyond dispute, and in this and other domains scholastic thought took on the rigid, dogmatic aspect for which it would be so scorned in the seventeenth century.1

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1. Introduction

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On Pasnau’s account, Peter John Olivi challenged the authority of Aristotle; in condemning his view, the Council of Vienne supported that of Aristotle; as a result, those who would otherwise have challenged Aristotelian doctrine in the years following the Council of Vienne instead resorted to fideism. Later authors internalized the Aristotelianism promoted by the Council, and their silence is proof that the condemnation prevented them from challenging, or even recognizing, the underlying metaphysical assumptions. The glorious scholastic enterprise of the thirteenth century, repeatedly beaten and broken by condemnation and censure, died and became a sterile body, separated from the very principles that once vivified it. In this separate state, it lied unchanged in the tomb of the universities for three centuries, running through the long-exhausted permutations sic et non of Aristotle’s system.

While variants on this reading of the history of philosophy have been popular for some time, the proof adduced here is particularly thought-provoking: the Council of Vienne’s declaration that the intellective soul must be of itself and essentially the form of the body. In the accompanying note, Pasnau provides his proof that Henry of Harclay, John of Jandun and Peter Auriol were anti-Aristotelians, suppressed by the Council:

Harclay remarks of the Averroist line on intellect that “nulla ratio probat oppositum. Unde solum propter fides teneo quod intellectiva est forma hominis” (Quaest. ord. 9 n. 59). Jandun recites the stock Aristotelian line and then remarks: “omnia taalia quae dicunt fideles catholici ego dico sim- pliciter esse vera sine omni dubitatione, sed demonstrare nescio. Gaudeant qui hoc sciant; sed sola fide teneo et confiteor” (In De an. III.12, col. 291). Auriol expressly invokes the Council of Vienne: “licet demonstrari non possit animam esse formam corporis modo aliarum formarum, tamen tenendum est, secundum quod mihi videtur, quod sicut figura est forma et pura perfectio cerae, sic anima est pura actuatio et formatio corporis eo modo quo se habent caeterae formae ... Illam autem conclusionem teneo specialiter propter determinationem Concilii, quae ex verborum apparentia videtur ad intentionem illam” (Sent. II.16.1.2 II:224b).²

Henry of Harclay does seem to favor “the Averroist line on intellect”; indeed, the paragraph Pasnau cites begins, “For this reason I believe that the Commentator [= Averroes] has Aristotle’s meaning in III De anima.”³ Likewise,

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² Pasnau, Metaphysical Themes, 435, n. 10.