Roger Bacon and Radical Aristotelianism 1266-77: An Introduction

In the vast literature on the Parisian condemnations which followed on the pioneering work of Ernest Renan and Pierre Mandonnet down to the systematic review by Roland Hissette and to later studies, one name is conspicuously absent from the indices of these studies, namely, Roger Bacon (Professor of Philosophy [MA] c. 1237-47 at the University of Paris and a senior resident at the Franciscan studium in Paris in the 1260’s).¹ This is, indeed, quite an anomaly since Renan had connected Latin Averroism with the Franciscan studium and Mandonnet had noted a significant connection between the works of Roger Bacon (1260-74) and the Condemnations of 1277.² Once again, in more recent studies of the


² Pierre Mandonnet, Siger de Brabant, ed. cit., (note 1), vol. 1, 238: “La condamnation de 1277 ne devait pas seulement atteindre les averroistes et secondairement Saint Thomas d’Aquin. Deux autres personnages célèbres du temps allaient subir et gravement le contre-coup de l’acte épiscopal du 7 mars. Nous avons nommé Roger Bacon et Gilles de Rome.” See John Wippel, Thomas Aquinas and the Condemnations of 1277, in: The Modern Schoolman, 72 (1995), 233-72. It is clear from this well-argued account that Thomas Aquinas was an intended object of this condemnation. Further, it has long been clear to scholars that scholarly activity of Giles of Rome was strongly affected by it. In this paper, I examine the evidence for Bacon’s concerns with the themes associated with Latin Averroism from about 1264-74. I am at work on a comprehensive study of Bacon’s later works and their relationship to the Parisian Condemnations. One exception to the general scholarly trend can be seen in the study by P. Hadrianus a Kržovljian, O.F.M. cap. Controversia doctrinalis inter magistros franciscanos et Sigerum de Brabant, in: Collectanea franciscana, 27 (1957), 121-65 for a review of Franciscan masters in relation to the Parisian condemnations of 1270 and 1277. My argument, however, will be that it was Bacon rather than Bonaventure who first raised the issues concerning the Faculty of Arts. See Jeremiah Hackett, Averroes and Roger Bacon on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy, in: Ruth Link-Salinger et al. (eds.), A Straight Path. Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture. Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman, Washington, D.C. 1988, 98-112; id., Practical Wisdom and Happiness in the Moral Philosophy of Roger Bacon, in: Mediaevalia, 12 (1986), 55-109.

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Parisian Condemnations, there is scarcely a mention of the one-time Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris (c. 1237-47) and Franciscan Friar (at the Franciscan Studium) in Paris from about 1256-79.³

The purpose of this paper is to present a strong case for interpreting the later works of Roger Bacon (1266-92) as a critical defence of the importance of Aristotle as interpreted by Avicenna and Averroes in the context of the debates at the University of Paris in the 1260’s.⁴ However, Roger Bacon’s unique synthesis of philosophy and theology in these years is no simple defence of Averroism as Renan thought. It is a very complex integration of philosophy into an Augustinian theology, one in which a via media is attempted between the extremes of the so-called Latin Averroists such as Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia and the criticisms of Franciscan theologians such as Richard Rufus and Bonaventure. Or better, it is one philosopher's attempted synthesis of Augustine with the new influences arising from the philosophy and science of the new translations of Aristotle and his interpreters, and also from non-aristotelian works especially in medieval science.⁵

In particular, I will want to examine a section of the Communia naturalium, which I believe must be dated sometime between 1268 and 1274.⁶

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⁴ As is clear from the Opus maius and related works, Bacon’s defence of Aristotle as interpreted by Avicenna and Averroes is self-consciously critical. On the issues relating to the central elements which arise in the Parisian Condemnations of 1270 and 1277, Roger Bacon makes very important precisions. Naturally, in the heat of polemic, precisions can quickly be forgotten. (Note: A shorter version of parts of this paper will appear in Jeremiah Hackett, ed., Aquinas on Mind and Intellect: New Essays (1997) [Papers from the Binghamton Conference on Ancient and Medieval Philosophy 1993-4]).


⁶ Roger Bacon, Communia naturalium, Liber 1, Pars 4, distinctio 3: de anima, in: Opera hactenus inedita Rogeri Baconi, Fasc. III, ed. Robert Steele, 1911, 281-302. This work will be cited as CN, I, 4, d.3. In his account of the chronology of Bacon’s works, Stewart C. Easton