THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF THE CONDEMNATION OF 1277: DIVINE POWER AND THE ESTABLISHED ORDER IN QUESTION

Alexander S. Jensen
School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Murdoch University and Perth Theological Hall

INTRODUCTION

In 1277, Bishop Stephen Tempier of Paris condemned two hundred and nineteen propositions, most inspired by Aristotelian thought, at the university there. With this condemnation, he cut short the academic debate about the latest theological developments, i.e., the reception of Aristotle's teaching. This was the first time that a whole coherent understanding of the world had come under attack, as opposed to the condemnation of an individual or a few theses. The condemnation of 1277 had astonishing unintended consequences. Even if most people would not agree with the brave statement of Pierre Duhem, that the condemnation of 1277 marked the birthday of modern science, it still had far-reaching effects.1 In this essay, I shall explore some of the unintended consequences of the condemnation of 1277. In particular, I shall discuss the impact of the insistence on the absolute freedom of God. This will take place in two steps. First, I shall examine the reception of the condemnation in the work of Duns Scotus. Second, I shall investigate two areas in the development of Western thinking in which the impact of the condemnation was felt, namely, the development of modern science and the theological understanding of God. Before we can embark on this discussion, however, I will need to provide some background on the developments leading to the condemnation and the condemnation itself.

BACKGROUND

The rediscovery of the corpus of Aristotle's writings was a major upheaval in mediaeval intellectual culture. This began in the early twelfth century and lasted until around 1270. At this point, all works of Aristotle bar a few writings had been translated and incorporated into the body of learning.

It must be noted that it was not the "pure" Aristotle that was incorporated into Western learning. Most texts came via Arab translations, and together

with the commentaries of Arab philosophers, which shaped the way in which Aristotle was read. The great Arab philosophers, such as Al-Farabi (al-Fārābī), Avicenna (ibn Sinā), Algazel (al-Ghāzālī) and Averroes (ibn Rushd), read Aristotle through the eyes of neo-Platonic philosophy, and thus “platonised” Aristotle. This was in line with the approach of the neo-Platonic philosophers in late antiquity, who harmonized Plato and Aristotle at the cost of platonising the latter. In addition, the Liber de Causis (Book of the Causes, ninth century), a work which was falsely attributed to Aristotle, consisted of a modified excerpt from the neo-Platonic philosopher Proclus’ Elements of Theology. This book became highly influential and coloured the interpretation of all other Aristotelian writings. Thus the Aristotelianism that developed in the universities in the twelfth century was not strictly speaking Aristotelian, but a platonised version of Aristotelian thinking interpreted by the Arab philosophers. Consequently, it has been suggested that the term Arab Peripatetic philosophy is more appropriate.

The incorporation of Aristotle and his Arab commentators into the Western body of learning was a major revolution. However, there was significant continuity in theological thinking throughout this period, and some fundamental assumptions remained constant throughout the Middle Ages. For example, it was commonly assumed throughout the early and high Middle Ages up to the end of the thirteenth century that God was essentially linked to creation and, notwithstanding God’s transcendence, immanent and present in the world. Augustine and the mediaeval tradition up to the rediscovery of Aristotle would understand this in terms of the neo-Platonic concept of emanation, although theologians would avoid this term because of its neo-Platonist connotations and implications for the freedom of God. Once theologians and philosophers were adopting Aristotelian thought forms, they would understand this relation in terms of causality. Nevertheless, both approaches saw God as essentially linked to creation, transcendent and yet immanent. It was only in the fourteenth century that this mediaeval consensus would be broken.

THE CONDEMNATION OF 1277

The Aristotelian revolution took several forms. On the one hand we find moderate theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, who incorporated a Christianized peripatetic philosophy into a Christian world view. Other scholars, mainly in the arts faculty, were much more radical. They applied Aristotle and the Arab philosophers consistently. The most famous of these were Boethius of Dacia and Siger of Brabant.

Such an intellectual revolution cannot be without its detractors. Conservative theologians, such as Bonaventure and Henry of Ghent, argued strongly against the use of Aristotelianism in philosophy and theology. While the intellectual argument on the merits (or lack thereof) of Aristotelianism or Peripatism was still in full swing, the church authorities took action.

There had been attempts to stop the Aristotelian revolution throughout the thirteenth century, yet mostly without lasting success. The first attempt was the proscription of Aristotelian teaching at Paris by the provincial council of Sens in 1210, and was repeated by the papal legate in Paris in 1215. This appears to have been effective for about twenty years, but eventually the condemnation was simply forgotten or ignored. In fact, by the mid-1250s the statutes of the university even prescribed the majority of Aristotle’s works to be studied and taught. We can safely assume that by this point the university was dominated by Aristotelianism.

The next attempt to halt the Aristotelian revolution was in 1270, when Bishop Tempier issued a list of thirteen theses prohibiting Aristotelian teaching. This does not appear to have met with success; they were phrased so loosely that the philosophers, schooled in subtle thought, found it easy to circumvent this prohibition. On January 18, 1277, however, Pope John XXI instructed the bishop to investigate rumours of heretical teaching at the university and report to him. Stephen Tempier established a commission to investigate this, and on the 7th of March 1277 the bishop issued a syllabus of 219 condemned theses. This list was aimed not only at key contents of

5 Dod, "Aristoteles Latinus," 73.
7 There is no English translation of the text. There are two recent editions of the Latin text, one with a German translation (Flasch, Aufklärung im Mittelalter?) and one with a French translation (David Piché, La Condamnation Parisienne de 1277: Nouvelle Édition du Texte Latin (Sic et Non; Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 2002).
peripatetic teaching, but also at the very foundations of the new philosophy. This condemnation marked an important triumph for a highly conservative group within the university, which had followed the introduction of Aristotelian teaching with suspicion. Leading members of that group, among them Henry of Ghent, who was an outspoken opponent of the use of Peripatetic thinking in philosophy and theology, were also members of the bishop's commission that investigated the claims. Given their familiarity with the tendencies within the university, it is not surprising that they were able to compile the list of errors within a short space of time – about three weeks.²

The document identified a whole body of unacceptable teaching. The main direction of the condemnation appears to have been any limitation on the freedom of God.¹⁰ The radical Aristotelians had taught that God was limited by the laws of (Aristotelian) science. So what was impossible according to nature (i.e., Aristotelian physics) was also impossible for God. Articles such as nos. 34 ("The first cause (i.e. God) cannot make many worlds")¹¹ and 49 ("God cannot move heaven in a linear movement. The reason is that this would leave a vacuum.")¹² are both not so much about the existence of multiple worlds or the movement of the heavens, but about God's freedom. According to Aristotelian physics both things are impossible, and so God, being subject to nature, cannot violate these laws.

So the condemnation of these articles affirms the absolute freedom of God, that God is not bound by science and that God can act against the laws of nature. The authors of the condemnation did not mean to assert that God would ever do this – i.e., create multiple worlds or move the heavens in a linear movement – but that God could if God wanted to. Thus the very foundations of a naturalistic and scientific world view were attacked. A scientific world view is dependent on the reliability of the natural order, but this is not given if one assumes a God who is free to act against nature. We will need to come back to this.

Related to this is the relation between the divine intellect and the divine will. This rejects an understanding of the will and the intellect that was

---

³ Flasch, Aufklärung im Mittelalter, 55.
⁵ Flasch, Aufklärung im Mittelalter, 131. My translation.
⁶ Flasch, Aufklärung im Mittelalter, 147. My translation.
proposed by Thomas Aquinas. He thought that the will follows the intellect. Thus if a possible course of action is recognised as good, then the will wills this. And if we act wrongly, which, as human beings, unfortunately we are bound to do, then this is because the intellect has misjudged the possible course of action, or has erred in its conclusions on what is good for the person. Art. 208 explicitly rejects this position and states the primacy of the will over the intellect.19

Another area of condemned teaching was the issue of individuation. The underlying question here is how an individual is actually individuated from common nature; so what makes a single horse an individual as distinct from general horse-nature? Thomas Aquinas had suggested a simple solution to this question: "matter is the principle of individuation."14 Thus the members of a species are individuated by their distinct material appearance, including all accidents. Thus a horse is a horse by virtue of having the nature "horse" and a distinct body.

This, however, would become problematic when applied to angels. Angels, obviously, have no body, and therefore no matter; they are pure forms.15 As matter is the individuating principle among members of one species, one can only speak of individual angels if one attributes an individual species to each angel. Otherwise there would be only one "angelness" without individuation.16 To the modern mind, this issue seems somewhat arcane, but, as we will see, this question has important repercussions in areas more relevant. At any rate, the bishop’s commission in Paris took it sufficiently seriously to condemn it, and so Art. 81 explicitly condemns that each angel is a separate species. The notion that matter is the individuating principle was condemned in Articles 96 and 97.17

Other articles were concerned with a large number of propositions which were seen to be heretical, for example that the human intellect is eternal (Art. 31) and that there is only one intellect for all people (Art. 32). There were also other theses condemned, such as a series of theses on Christian morals, like Art. 183: "Simple fornication, i.e. between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman, is no sin."

14 "individuationis principium materia est" in Thomas Aquinas, De ente et essentia (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Jun., 1979), 12.
15 ST 1, q. 50, a. 2.
16 ST 1, q. 50, a. 4.
As a whole, two contradicting world views and concepts of human knowledge were at stake with the condemnation of 1277. On the one hand, there was the new learning, which was open to new influences, tried to understand the world in a scientific manner, and did not avoid the problems arising from this encounter. On the other hand, there was the old world view, which gave absolute authority to the church, its traditions and its representatives, the proponents of a traditional Christian world view. Unlike in similar modern debates on traditional religious world views and openness to science, such as the debate on intelligent design/creationism and science, or on women's ministry in the church or the church's acceptance of homosexual people, it appears that the church could change the terms of the debate by the authority of the bishop.

Today, even if the church attempts to silence heterodox voices, such as Hans Küng or Leonardo Boff, this does not stop the debate, it just moves it into a different forum. Even when, from 1910 to 1967, all Roman Catholic clergy and office holders had to swear the “Oath against Modernism,” this did not stop the modern scientific world view. It merely excluded the Roman Catholic Church from the debate about faith and science. In the days of Bishop Tempier, however, such a condemnation had to be respected, especially as it was not an isolated event. It is recognised that Pope John XXI intended to back the condemnation, which, however, he could not do due to his accidental death on May 20 of that year. In addition, only a few days after the condemnation in Paris, the Archbishop of Canterbury issued a similar syllabus of condemned teaching, mainly directed at the University of Oxford.

This is not to say that the debate was stopped instantly. The Dominicans continued to defend their great teacher Thomas Aquinas, and Aristotle and his Arab commentators continued to be read widely. However, the terms of the theological discourse changed, and theologians as well as philosophers would take note of the condemned theses and avoid teaching them. There is evidence that the condemnation was widely accepted as authoritative, for example among the Franciscans, for whom it became highly useful in their rivalry with the Dominicans. Franciscan theologians everywhere were obliged to adhere to the condemnation from 1279, and a number of significant universities enforced the condemnation through their by-

18 Flasch, Aufklärung im Mittelalter?, 84.
19 Flasch, Aufklärung im Mittelalter?, 53-55.
20 Flasch, Aufklärung im Mittelalter?, 60-61.
laws. Grant has also presented a large body of evidence of quotations of and direct allusions to the condemnation in the work of later philosophers and theologians, such as John Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, Thomas Bradwardine and Jean Buridan. Mahoney enlarged the list of people who quoted the condemnation significantly, and extended its reach into the sixteenth century. Thus the condemnation of 1277 became internationally recognised and changed the development of Western thinking significantly. However, this did not return the debate to the neo-Platonic Augustinian theology of Henry of Ghent, Bonaventure and others. Instead, it moved the debate forward, into previously uncharted waters.

THE CONSEQUENCES

The insistence on the absolute freedom of God in the articles of 1277 had enormous consequences for Western thinking, even if Duhem's bold thesis, which was also taken up by Gilson, that the condemnation of 1277 marked the birthday of modern science has been widely discredited. Some authors assume that the impact of the condemnation on the development of Western thinking is negligible, while others argue that the condemnation was a significant contribution to the later developments. A third group argues that the condemnation was an important contribution to the new directions.

21 Luca Bianchi, "1277: A Turning Point in Medieval Philosophy?" in What is Philosophy in the Middle Ages? (eds Jan Aertsen and Andreas Speer; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1998), 97. See also Luca Bianchi, Censure et Liberté Intellectuelle à l'Université de Paris (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1999), 207-17.
mediaeval thinking took in the fourteenth century, but not the only one. It is, obviously, impossible to speculate what would have happened without the condemnation. Certain developments — we cannot know which — may have taken place regardless. Others may not have taken place. Even if it was shown that the effect of the condemnation itself was minimal, Emery and Speer suggest that it "does indeed signify or symbolize some critical turning point in the history of medieval thinking."28

I shall now examine the reception of the condemnation in the work of Duns Scotus, in order to show how philosophy and theology in the fourteenth century adapted to the restrictions imposed by the condemnation. Then I shall investigate two areas in which the effects of the condemnation were felt, its impact on the development of modern science and the theological understanding of God.

RECEPTION OF THE CONDEMNATION IN JOHN DUNS SCOTUS

I outlined three areas that concerned Bishop Tempier and his commission above, namely, the freedom of God, the relation between intellect and will and individuation. We can see in all three areas Duns Scotus remaining firmly within the new boundaries to theological and philosophical investigation. However, we will also see that he did not return to the Augustinian and neo-Platonic theology of the opponents of the new thinking, but moved forward into previously uncharted regions.

With regard to the freedom of God, theologians after the condemnation of 1277 emphasised the distinction between the absolute power of God (potentia dei absoluta) and the ordained power of God (potentia dei ordinata) much more than their predecessors. This distinction was nothing new. At least from the eleventh century onwards we find this concept deeply embedded in Western theology, and we can find related motifs in the writings of St Augustine.

In short, the absolute power of God is the assurance of God's omnipotence. God can do absolutely everything God wills. It safeguards God's freedom. The ordained power of God safeguards God's reliability. God may be able to do everything, but God does not will to, because God has committed

godself to the order God has created. Thus God could have created a completely different world, multiple worlds or even no world at all, but once God created this one, God is reliable within the system, both of natural laws and of the economy of salvation.

Before the end of the thirteenth century, the emphasis was on God's reliability. Theologians such as Albertus Magnus and Bonaventure identified the ordained power of God with the total preordained, providential will of God. This was then further identified with God's goodness and justice. Consequently, the hypothesis of an alternative order, although notionally kept up, was really merely an empty construct. God was totally reliable and committed to the present order.29

Thomas Aquinas emphasised the freedom of God much more than his older contemporaries. He suggested that God is omnipotent and can do everything that does not lead to a contradiction.30 However, God's absolute power is restricted by what God has willed from eternity and preordained.31 Thus God will continue to will what God once decided to do; God's will is unchangeable and thus is reliable.32 In addition, God's power is also related to God's essence. Although God's actions are not determined by God's nature, the world is directed towards God's goodness as its ultimate final cause.33 However, because God's goodness exceeds all earthly things, there are different ways in which God's goodness could have been manifest in creation. Even if God could have created another world, it would have had to be one that would have been in accordance with God's goodness.34 So for Thomas, God is absolutely powerful and God's will is absolutely free, but the power and will are circumscribed in a way so that God is reliable. This circumscription, however, was not by the laws of natural science, but by the previous decision of God.

The radical Aristotelians of the arts faculty went much further than this. They had subordinated God's will under the laws of natural philosophy, so that God could not do anything impossible in Aristotelian natural philosophy, such as doing something that would result in the existence of a

30 ST I, q. 25, a. 3.
31 ST I, q. 25, a. 5.
32 ST I, q. 19, a. 7.
33 ST I, q. 25, a. 5.
34 ST I, q. 35, a. 5.
vacuum (which was, according to Aristotle, something abhorrent to nature and thus impossible). So not even God could bring about a vacuum. The condemnation was directed against this limitation of divine freedom in the name of Aristotelian physics. Thus if the thesis was condemned that God cannot move the heavens in a straight line, because this would leave a vacuum (Art. 49), then this did not imply that one should believe that God was going to do this, but that God could do this if God wanted to, probably assuming that God was not going to will it. In the same way, when the thesis was condemned that God cannot create multiple worlds (Art. 34), then this did not imply that Bishop Tempier meant to provoke thought-experiments about multiple universes, but merely that he condemned the denial of God’s omnipotence.

In line with the requirements of the condemnation, in Duns Scotus’ work the absolute power of God obtains a new, prominent status. This is intimately related to his understanding of the relation between God and creation, because for Scotus, creation is an act of God’s free will in a new and radical way. For Scotus, God has before God’s mind an infinite number of worlds, which contain various combinations of natures (beings). From among these combination of beings, or, to use Leibniz’ somewhat anachronistic but fitting phrase, from these possible worlds God, by God’s will, chooses one. Thus Scotus has, while safeguarding, in line with the requirements of the condemnation of 1277, God’s freedom, cut the essential relation between God and creation. Creation, as Scotus understands it, is not an expression of God’s being any more, but a contingent decision of God’s will. In this context, Scotus’ understanding of the relation between will and intellect becomes relevant. Here, Scotus, in line with Art. 208 of the condemnation of 1277, emphasises the dominance of the will over the

35 Physics IV, 6–9.
36 Flasch, Aufklärung im Mittelalter, 131.
37 Etienne Gilson, Johannes Duns Scotus: Einführung in die Grundgedanken seiner Lehre (trans. Werner Dettloff, Düsseldorf: L. Schwann, 1959), 633. See also Reinhold Seeberg, Die Theologie des Johannes Duns Scotus: Eine Dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung (Studien Zur Geschichte Der Theologie Und Der Kirche 5; Leipzig: Dieterich, 1900), 159. Note that, although Seeberg’s book is quite old, it is still one of the standard works on the topic. See Richard Cross, Duns Scotus (Great Medieval Thinkers; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 154, n. 6. Knuutilla observed that Leibniz’ notion of “the best of all possible worlds” was already anticipated by Scotus. Simo Knuutilla, “Modal Logic,” in The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy (eds Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinborg: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 355.
intellect. We recall that for Thomas Aquinas, the will followed the intellect. In contrast to Aquinas' intellectualist understanding, Duns Scotus sets his voluntarist understanding of human and divine decision making. The intellect sets before the mind a range of possible courses of action, and the will makes a decision between them.

Thus it is not for any recognised good that God chooses one possible creation over another, but for the reasons unknown to humankind. It needs to be added, however, that God will not will anything that contradicts God's own goodness. Thus the world, although contingent, is directed towards God's goodness. We recall that for Thomas, the world was an expression of God's being, although not the only one possible. However, the emphasis in Thomas' theology was the essential relation between God and the world as well as the reliability of God. The freedom of God, in this case that God could have created another expression of God's goodness, is not a primary thought at all, and plays a subordinate role. This is different in the thought of Duns Scotus. For Scotus, the freedom of God's will is of primary interest, and the relation of creation to God's being — i.e., to God's goodness — is of secondary interest. Thus the emphasis is on the contingency of creation. William of Ockham would take another important step in the direction that Duns Scotus showed. For William of Ockham, God's will makes decisions without reference to the divine essence.

Duns Scotus' understanding of the relation between God and creation is also influenced by his strong emphasis on the distinction of powers, i.e., between God's absolute power (potentia absoluta) and ordained power (potentia ordinata). We have seen above that, although this distinction had been known since the eleventh century, it did not play a significant part in the theological discussion. In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, however, the distinction received great significance, as it was needed to safeguard God's freedom. We find the beginning of this development in the thought of Duns Scotus.

For Duns Scotus, God can do different things according to God's absolute power (potentia absoluta) than God can do within the realm of the ordained power (potentia ordinata). Scotus identifies the ordained power with the laws of nature, which God established when God created the world. Because God is the giver of these laws, God is also in a position to act independently of them, just as, in late mediaeval political theory, the king, who is the

39 Seeberg, Die Theologie des Johannes Duns Scotus, 162–63.

Jensen: Condemnation of 1277
lawgiver, can act above the law. When God acts above the law, however, this is not outside the law. Instead, God sets new law. So if God acted against the established order, and God could do this if God wanted to, then God would change this order. Thus Scotus safeguards divine omnipotence and freedom to an extreme degree. As a consequence, there is the potential in Duns’ teaching that God may not be essentially reliable any more.

Finally, Duns Scotus would also incorporate the articles on individuation in his thinking. We recall that Thomas Aquinas, among others, suggested that the individuating factor was matter (materia). Consequently, he had to assume that immaterial beings, such as angels, were not individuals of a species, because, as they are immaterial, they lack the individuating principle. Consequently, Thomas had to assume that each angel is its own species. We also saw that this solution, which provided a simple and coherent answer to the problem, was not only criticised and rejected, but also explicitly condemned in 1277. Consequently, Scotus had to find another solution to this problem. The Subtle Doctor introduced a new concept into the discussion: haecceity (haecceitas, "thisness"). Haecceity denotes a substantial attribute that makes something an individual. Thus a horse has a horse-nature, which is its quiddity (quidditas, "whatness"), that makes this object a horse. At the same time, it has something that individuates it, i.e., that makes this horse this particular horse. Thus the individual horse Red Rum is derived from the idea of the horse in the divine mind, together with the haecceity of Red Rum. Obviously, for a material being like a horse, matter is also part of this particular horse, but it does not constitute its thisness. Thus Duns Scotus avoids the problems of Thomas Aquinas’ approach, because matter is not the individuating principle. With regard to angels, each angel is an individual within a species. Thus he is able to stay within the boundaries drawn by the condemnation of 1277. This, however, was at the cost of introducing novel distinctions of great subtlety, which would be rejected later precisely for this reason.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

The prohibition of 1277, however, had significant unintended consequences. Some natural philosophers and even theologians took seriously the idea

---

that God may actually create, or have created, multiple worlds. Thus they explored the prerequisites for this to be possible, and what followed from this possibility. This is not the space to go into the details of the argument. It will suffice to say that admitting the possibility of multiple worlds leads to significant problems, for which Aristotelian physics did not have an answer. In the final consequence, one had to assume an empty space, a void, in which God had created this world and in which God could create more worlds.

Thus a number of natural philosophers and theologians took the inversion of some of the condemned theses of 1277 as a starting point for philosophical speculation. Together, these speculations led to the overstretching and, finally, to the collapse of Aristotelian physics. At the same time these new speculations also led to the discovery of the foundation of the new science, for example in the mathematical inventions of the “Merton College Calculators,” a group of mathematicians who discovered important concepts such as the “mean speed theorem,” which is instrumental in calculating speed and acceleration and would become one of the foundations of Galileo’s new science.

The consequences of the new insistence on the absolute power of God were not restricted to the development of physics. They also affected the more fundamental issue of God’s relation to creation. We have seen earlier that in mediaeval theology God was generally seen as utterly reliable, not only because of God’s revelation, but, as it were, essentially. God was committed to the created order, which actually partook in God’s own being. The new emphasis on the absolute power of God would destroy this certainty.

We have already seen above that Duns Scotus emphasises divine omnipotence by giving the absolute power of God a new, prominent status in his theology. According to God’s absolute power (potentia absoluta), God is free to act above the laws that God godself has established, which Scotus regards as God’s ordained power (potentia ordinata). As a consequence, both the reliability of God and the established order are called into question.

For William of Ockham, the absolute power of God does not constitute a separate realm of action from the ordained, as it does for Scotus. Instead,

---

he sees both powers of God as one, at least from the human perspective. Consequently, everything God does is according to God's potestas ordinata. Thus even if God interferes with the created order, which God can still do subject to the prohibition of logical contradiction, then it is ordained; although in some texts, Ockham describes the miraculous work of God above or against the created order as according to God's absolute power. Regardless of this terminological inconsistency, Ockham's God is free to change the created order, even the order of salvation. For example, Ockham thought that in the transition from the old covenant to the new, God changed the order of salvation.\footnote{Volker Leppin, Glaubte Wahrheit: Das Theologieverständnis Wilhelms von Ockham (Forschungen Zur Kirchen- Und Dogmengeschichte 63; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1995), 50. Older scholarship assumed that the Nominalist understanding of the distinction of powers would lead to a whimsical and thus completely unreliable God. See Heiko A. Oberman, The Impact of the Reformation: Essays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 8-9. It was assumed that the unreliability of God forced humans to find other certainty, which would be in the reliance of human reason in the rationalism of the early modern period. See Hans Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age (trans. Robert M. Wallace; Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 161-62. Although this view is not tenable any longer, the order God has established here on earth is still not reliable anymore. God can change the order and can interfere with it. Thus the foundation of human existence, i.e., the reliability of the cosmos, is not given any longer.}

The Ockhamist way of distinguishing the powers of God became the predominant way of thinking in the late Middle Ages. As a result, the understanding of the relation between God and the world changed significantly. First, physics and theology became separated. According to the old way, God and world were essentially linked. For science this meant that it was impossible to understand God without the world and the world without God. If creation is now seen as contingent and dependent on God's will alone, not on God's being, then theologians can do – actually, must do – without science. All they can study is divine revelation. At the same time, natural philosophers and mathematicians can study the world without reference to God, for God is not essentially involved in the world any longer.\footnote{Randi has shown how Scoto's legalistic understanding of the powers exercised influence even after Ockham. Randi, "A Scotist Way" And Obermann described how thinking very close to Ockham is found in the fifteenth century theologian Gabriel Biel. See Heiko A. Oberman, The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism (3rd ed.; Durham: Labyrinth, 1983), 30–56. So it is safe to say that the distinction of God's powers with an emphasis on God's absolute freedom was the predominant way of thinking in the late Middle Ages.}

\textit{Colloquium} 41/1 2009
Second, if God can change the order or interfere with it, then the present created order is not reliable any longer according to natural theology. The only certainty for humans is the divine revelation, which is a matter of faith, not of reason. So for the rational thinker, new certainty will have to be found. And this will be in the reliance on human reason in the early modern period and the Enlightenment.

CONCLUSION

We have seen in this paper one particular area of the unintended consequences that resulted from Bishop Tempier’s condemnation of Aristotelian teaching at Paris. I am quite certain that the bishop would turn in his grave if he knew the long-term result of his action. Instead of enhancing orthodoxy at Paris, it became a main contributing factor in a development that eventually led to the separation of theology, philosophy and physics, of faith and reason. Blumenberg has shown convincingly, even if his interpretation of Ockham has been questioned, that the new intellectual developments in the fourteenth century led to a crisis, which could be overcome only by a radical departure from mediaeval thought, and which eventually found its expression in the rationalist philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.  

For the theologian, the debate about the transformation of Western thinking in the late Middle Ages underlines that all human understanding of God is historically contingent. No part of (at least Western) Christianity can claim to be in direct continuity with pre-modern or even early Christianity, as, for example, James I. Packer claims for the evangelical movement: “[Evangelicalism] is, we maintain, the oldest version of Christianity; theologically regarded, it is apostolic Christianity itself.”

Contrary to such claims, everyone is part of the new view of God and the world that emerged in the late Middle Ages. Both modern theism, in whatever form, and the rejection of that God in modern atheism are based on this new view. Any understanding of revelation is then based on this


This is the main thesis of Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age. This is not to pass any judgement on this development. I believe that the modern world view and the development of science have brought great benefit to humankind. But we need to be aware of the contingent nature of the way in which we ourselves are thinking, and much of this can be traced back to 1277.

Jensen: Condemnation of 1277
fundamental understanding of the nature of the divine and its relation to the world. Consequently, the theologian, formulating a contemporary understanding of God or in dialogue with other traditions, has to be aware that his or her understanding of the divine and its relation to the world is not God given or innate to human nature, but the result of complex historical developments.