

CARDINAL FISHER AND DUNS SCOTUS

HOW Scotistic was St. John Fisher? This is a question seldom asked. Yet certain words and deeds of the saintly Cardinal warrant the asking. Fisher defended Scotus, followed him in a number of points, and recommended him very highly.

Fisher defended Scotus. From what? From the abuse of Doctor Luther. Martin Luther very evidently did not sin by excess of love for the Scholastics. How he desired tomes of Aquinas and Scotus to enhance his memorable pyrotechnics of December 10, 1520! Fortunately no one was willing to make the generous donation,¹ so the best Luther could contribute to Scholasticism was to burn the *Summa Angelica*² along with the Papal Bull and the Decretals. This *Summa*, however, was not a strictly Scholastic *Summa*, since it was mainly a moral opus. But in it the author, Bl. Angelus of Clavasio, O. F. M., quotes the Scholastics. So, at least implicitly, Luther did express his fanatic hatred for the Scholastic Masters. Of the latter Luther hated best of all Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, and Duns Scotus. Hence we are not surprised at Fisher's rejoinder to the Reformer of Wittenberg:

"You have erred mainly because you have repudiated Thomas, Scotus, and the other Scholastics."³

Name-calling was Luther's specialty and he certainly had a sufficient repertoire. Although he did call Duns Scotus "scholasticissimus" (the most scholastic) and the "leading teacher," he considered the Subtle Doctor "the greatest Sophist" of the Scholastics.⁴ For Luther, Scotus is also a great heretic. Principally, Luther objects to the Scotistic doctrine on Grace and the Sacraments, and accordingly makes a Pelagian of the Marian Doctor.⁵ It is in these questions that

1. Hartmann Grisar, S. J., *Luther*, IV (Herder & Co., Freiburg in Breisgau, 1924), 370.

2. The real title of this *Summa* is: *Summa Casuum Conscientiae compilata per Sanctae Theologiae et Juris Pontificii Doctorem Fratrem Angelum de Clavasio Ordinis Minorum*. It was very popular and had close to twenty incunabula editions.

3. Michelangelo Bacheca, O. F. M., *I Martiri Francescani d'Inghilterra* (Tipografia Agostiniana, Rome, 1930), 74.

4. Valens Heynck, O. F. M., "Die Verteidigung der Sakramentenlehre des Duns Skotus durch den hl. John Fisher gegen die Anschuldigungen Luthers," *Franziskanische Studien* (Verlag der Franziskus-Druckerei, Werl in Westf.), XXIV (1937), p. 166.

5. Grisar, *op. cit.*, pp. 70, 253.

Herr Martin reserved his choicest epithets for John Duns. The sacramental teaching of Scotus he branded as "heretical," "opposed to the apostolic and catholic doctrine," as "the Scotist dream," "most abhorrent heresy," and "devilish poisonous slime."⁶ Over and above these compliments, Luther was wont to quote or misquote Scotus, whenever he thought it suitable.

It is against such abuse that the Bishop of Rochester rose up in defense of the Subtle Doctor. His first work against Luther, the *Assertionis lutheranae confutatio*, published in 1523,⁷ went through six editions in two years. It was intended as a refutation of Herr Luther's *Assertio omnium articulorum Martini Lutheri per Bullas Leonis X novissime damnatorum*. In the very first chapter of his *Confutatio*, John Fisher answers Luther's charges against Scotus. Father Valens Heynck, O. F. M., has printed parts of the above *Confutatio*,⁸ and I am sure he will allow me to translate a few pertinent passages from the Latin:

"Why, Luther, do you not cite the place where Scotus says this, since you heap such calumny upon him using his own words? But that all may know that you are clearly a liar and a mere imposter, listen to what Scotus says in Book IV. . . ."⁹ "Luther, however, who is not ashamed to lie about Scotus, having passed over one part of the 'obex,' quotes the other and attacks Scotus. . . ."¹⁰ "What others have said, whose names he [Luther] does not even mention, interests me little. Scotus, however, is not of their number. . . ."¹¹

"Truly (as you say), these things are beside the point! Still, since you [Luther] censure Scotus here, the reader will know that you do it without cause."¹²

Then Fisher goes on to explain the true doctrine of the great Franciscan Doctor, as he does over and over throughout the work. Emphatically he ends one section:

From this it is evident to all that you [Luther] have concocted many lies about Scotus.¹³

6. Heynck, *loc. cit.*, p. 166.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 168, and note 23.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-175.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 172, 175

These passages and many others leave no doubt that Bishop Fisher, the Chancellor of Cambridge, was an ardent student of Scotus, knew him thoroughly, and tolerated no tampering with his good name or doctrine.

Not much has been written as yet to show how closely Cardinal Fisher followed Scotus in the realm of philosophical and theological thought. But we do know that he defended the Scotistic teaching about the Church and the Sacraments. And he must be considered a Scotist in the problem of attrition and contrition.¹⁴ In fact, on that point he vehemently opposed Luther.¹⁵

Strange to say, the two contemporary English Cardinals, Wolsey and Fisher, had a liking for Duns Scotus. Wolsey, the diplomat, founded Christ's College of Oxford, and for it he prescribed all the works of the Subtle Doctor as the teacher's text.¹⁶ Fisher, the doctor, had St. John's College erected at Cambridge, and the autograph of his statutes reads in part:

We therefore establish and ordain that each week three disputations shall be diligently conducted by them [the students], . . . one . . . in philosophy the other two, in like manner, in theology . . . and that, in accordance with the teaching of John Scotus, in such wise, that in each disputation two questions are discussed according to the order of two distinctions from the books of the said John Scotus, commencing with the beginning of the first book and continuing till the end of the *Quodlibeta* of the same, and always resuming from the beginning whenever the end of the entire work is reached.¹⁷

Fisher, therefore, goes so far as to prescribe at least the *Oxoniense* and *Quodlibeta* of the Subtle Doctor as a basis for the disputations of his beloved students. Moreover, in the next chapter of the statutes the holy Bishop determines that no one can obtain his theological doctorate unless he shall have first publicly expounded twenty questions according to the doctrine of Scotus or of the latter's pupil, Francis de Mayronis, O. F. M.¹⁸

From the above it appears fairly evident that Cardinal Fisher fostered the thought of the Subtle Doctor by conviction. It is indeed an

14. Valens Heynck, O. F. M., "Der hl. John Fisher und die Skotistische Reuelehre," *Franziskanische Studien*, XXV (1938), 107, 131-133.

15. Fisher says this himself: "In quo vehementer nostra cum tua pugnat opinio." *Ibid.*, p. 111.

16. Bacheca, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

17. Translated from the Italian in Bacheca, pp. 75-76.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

honor for the Franciscan School to number Bishop Fisher, the Saint, the Cardinal-Martyr, among the champions of the Subtle and Marian Doctor.

The very fact that the continental Reformation had dragged the thought of Scotus into the mêlée so prominently, shows that in the sixteenth century Scotism was still a potent factor in genuine Scholasticism. Both Eck¹⁹ and Karlstadt²⁰ studied Scotus for hours. Luther, following the nominalism of Ockham and Biel, opposed it to Scotism. Cardinal Fisher took time and trouble to defend the learned Duns. And Wolsey, of all people, prescribes his works as a textbook. And the English Reformation outdid the continental in its hatred of Scotus. Very significantly Henry VIII and his minions called John Duns the "Hercules of the Papists!"

It is the writer's hope that someone with the complete works of Cardinal Fisher at his disposal will acquaint us more in detail with the Scotism of the saintly and learned Bishop of Rochester.

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19. Bernhard Walde, *Johannes Eck, Explanatio Psalmi Vigesima* (1538), in *Corpus Catholicorum*, No. 13, p. 48, note 3.

20. Ferdinand Doelle, O. F. M., "Das Wittenberger Franziskanerkloster und die Reformation," *Franziskanische Studien*, X (1923), 279-280.