



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Past and Present Society

The Fourteenth Century and the Decline of Scholasticism

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Source: *Past & Present*, No. 9 (Apr., 1956), pp. 30-41

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of The Past and Present Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/650041>

Accessed: 14-05-2019 22:16 UTC

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THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY AND THE DECLINE OF SCHOLASTICISM

THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY WAS A PERIOD OF UPHEAVAL. SUCH FEATURES as the decline of demesne farming, the revolts in town and country, the Hundred Years War, the Great Schism, the controversy over the Poverty of Christ, and the careers of Ockham and Wyclif, illustrate how widespread the disturbance was. Yet, our knowledge of the thought of the period has barely passed beyond its more directly social and political aspects. Though numerous continental writers have studied individual thinkers, Michalski's articles remain the best general assessment of its climate.¹ Even E. Gilson, the leading authority on medieval philosophy, cannot do for the fourteenth century what he was able to do for earlier periods.² The lines are not firm enough to allow any positive judgement. Terms like "disintegration" and "decline" are the clearest we have, but they are negative, pointing to what was disappearing rather than to what was present. This article is an attempt to reverse this emphasis by drawing attention to certain positive features in fourteenth-century thought.³

I

Although the thought of the fourteenth century differed radically from that of the thirteenth century, it is too often regarded as a more or less direct continuation of the preceding era. Terms such as Nominalist and Realist, Augustinian and Thomist, are used to describe the thinkers and currents of thought in both periods.⁴ Yet, the more the fourteenth century is examined the less tenable such a view becomes.

The overriding difference between the two centuries lies in the relation of reason to faith. Scholasticism may, at its broadest, be understood as the application of reason to dogma. The scholastics fixed their sights on the divine, enlisting the support of reason and practical knowledge to attain a fuller understanding of the truths which lay beyond them. With both God and man as its subject, scholasticism differed from both dogma and natural philosophy. It sought to translate into rational terms the truths that came from revelation alone; though belief was supreme, reason had an essential part to play in elucidating, classifying and, where possible, demonstrat-

ing the tenets of faith. Similarly, it was not enough for reason to regard the facts of experience in their own natural light; they had, like the propositions of geometry, to be related to the larger scheme of things.

The method of scholasticism was the disputation, the *questio*, whereby a problem was posed (e.g. Whether God was the highest good), the arguments *pro* and *contra* stated, and the conclusions drawn. While the *questio* was peculiar to scholasticism, the two are not synonymous and it must not be assumed that where the form of the *questio* was present there also was scholasticism. This identification has hindered the understanding of the disputes of the fourteenth century, causing them to be regarded too much in the light of those of the previous era.⁵ Argument for argument's sake is no more the hallmark of scholasticism than of any other method of speculation.⁶

Until the first decade of the fourteenth century it could be said that faith and reason, although often at odds, had lived in comparative harmony for a century. While there had never been a stable balance to which the vast majority of scholastics had subscribed, the middle years of the thirteenth century, when St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) was developing his system, marked the height of the attempt to harmonize faith with reason. Where previously the traditional outlook, represented by the Augustinians, had regarded all true knowledge as the result of God illuminating the soul, Aquinas made all human knowledge begin with sense perception. From the experience of the senses, the mind, as immaterial, could abstract the true essence and so attain to knowledge. Thus from the individual man, Socrates, the mind could arrive at the concept of Man, the species, with its origin in God. Similarly, everything which existed in this world provided an analogy with God; and in the light of the relation of causes in this world St. Thomas proved the existence of God from the need to have a first cause. St. Thomas's system was the culmination of the effort to fuse the natural and the supernatural into a comprehensive outlook, in which one was complementary to the other. In doing so he utilized the works of Aristotle, which from the beginning of the century had been rapidly rediscovered by the West and translated into Latin. From the start St. Thomas's system was regarded with hostility and suspicion by the more orthodox Augustinians, for whom the sensory and material world was an obstacle rather than an aid to true understanding.

It was not, however, the mere opposition of the Augustinians to Thomism that marked the end of the classical period of scholastic-

ism; there had always been a difference of emphasis on the respective rôles of faith and reason. What was new was the open breach between them. From about 1320 the attitude expressed in St. Anselm's dictum, "I understand to believe", was completely set aside, and the attempt at finding a union between the created and the divine, which had been the objective of both Augustinians and Thomists, was abandoned. During the next thirty years scholasticism was transformed, from a positive effort to compass the natural and the supernatural, into an attitude which K. Michalski has described as one of criticism and scepticism.

This upheaval was not the work of any individual thinker or event: in a sense the rupture between faith and reason was inherent in the very attempt to establish a causal connexion between God's will on high and the actions of his creatures on earth. Signs of disturbance were already apparent in St. Thomas's own lifetime, as the full impact of the rediscovery of Aristotle came to be felt. The Church did not accept Aristotle without a struggle. A series of condemnations culminated in those of 1277, when Bishop Tempier of Paris pronounced against 219 theses associated with Aristotle.⁷ The attack was directed primarily against Averroes and his followers, who asserted that natural reason was self-sufficient and did not require the guidance of theology to reach the truth. Yet its effect was to give added impetus to the distrust of the powers of reason in discussing God, and to the desire for a return to a simpler and more direct way of viewing him. It led to a series of treatises attacking the Aristotelian-Thomist outlook, written by both Franciscans⁸ and secular thinkers. These helped to make for the changing climate of the fourteenth century; but it was not until the advent of Duns Scotus and, later, William of Ockham, that the new phase in thought really began.

Duns Scotus (d. 1308)⁹ gave open expression to the rejection of reason from questions of faith. God, he held, was so free and his ways so unknowable they could not be assessed by human means. Accordingly there could be no place for analogy or causality in discussing him; he was beyond all calculation. Duns, in the great emphasis he placed on God's freedom, put theology outside the reach of reason.¹⁰ This was his most momentous bequest to the fourteenth century, for around the freedom of God's will revolved the main questions that were to exercise his successors in the next generation. Once it was held that God was too infinitely free to be within the ken of practical knowledge, the question naturally arose — What was the relation of God's will to free will in man? Or, put another way,

How could natural phenomena be judged in the light of God's will if his ways were unknowable?

Duns did not attempt to introduce the new questions, which naturally followed from this changed view of divine and human relations. They were brought in by the far more radical thinking of William of Ockham (d. 1349).¹¹ He gave full rein to the divorce between practical and theoretical knowledge and, unlike Duns, went on to apply the consequences to man's relation to God. In his *Commentary on the Sentences* (1318) Ockham divided knowledge into two kinds — intuitive and abstract.¹² Intuitive knowledge was concerned only with the existence of an object, with its immediate impact on the senses. Abstract knowledge involved a mental process in which the mind reflected on what had been brought to its attention, even though the original object were no longer present. This distinction enabled Ockham to show that the process of knowing did not necessarily imply the existence of the object known. Abstract knowledge accordingly dealt with terms (*suppositiones*) and thus all thinking was the arranging of concepts which might or might not correspond with real things. By making sensory experience the sole criterion of reality all but individuals became mental constructions. As a result, species, values, and all other abstractions, were placed beyond the range of intuitive knowledge. This division meant that there had to be two different standards of truth: proof could extend only to what could be ascertained in practice; everything else was a matter of speculation, allowing of no certainty, and at best no more than probable. Only when we regard Ockhamism in this light can we speak of scepticism; as a theory of knowledge it approximated more to what we should call empiricism, restricting knowledge to practice. Doubt did not arise at the level of experience, but was reserved for all that lay beyond it.

Had Ockham left his discussion as a general statement of verification it could justly be argued, as certain modern historians do,¹³ that he was not a sceptic; but he did not stop there, and it is in his application of his theory to matters of theology that its effects were most far-reaching.

In turning to theology Ockham was concerned primarily with human free will. The problem was raised by means of the long-accepted distinction between God's two kinds of power — his ordained power and his absolute power. God's ordained power (*potentia ordinata*) consisted of his decrees as revealed in the Bible and by ecclesiastical authority. It applied only to this world and his creatures, providing them with the constant and requisite

standards by which they were to be governed. In this sense God's ordained power applied to his creatures rather than to his own nature. God's absolute power (*potentia absoluta*), on the other hand, was concerned primarily with God himself, without reference to this or any other universe. It denoted his omnipotence purely and simply, and as such was no way involved in sustaining an established order of priorities as was his ordained power. Willing was its only law and infinite freedom its only standard.

So long as God's absolute power continued to be regarded merely as an attribute of his nature there could be no danger in mentioning it; but in the hands of Ockham and his followers it became the general means of discounting dogma. Where previously God's absolute power had been associated with God's ability to act freely, it now came to be applied to whatever he had created. As the source of all his power God's *potentia absoluta* was used to override the decrees of his *potentia ordinata*. For the sceptics, God, by his absolute power, was so free that nothing was beyond the limits of possibility: he could make black white and true false, if he so chose: mercy, goodness and justice could mean whatever he willed them to mean. Thus not only did God's absolute power destroy all value and certainty in this world, but his own nature disintegrated; the traditional attributes of goodness, mercy and wisdom, all melted down before the blaze of his omnipotence. He became synonymous with uncertainty, no longer the measure of all things.

It is in this sense that we can speak of scepticism. God's *potentia absoluta* was essentially the application of uncertainty to God himself. It put faith beyond a rational assessment, and made God's omnipotence the justification for returning a verdict of "unproven" to everything outside practical proof. Consequently, reason could no longer support or confirm belief. Belief had either to withdraw from the discussion altogether, leaving the field free for fact, or to be subject to the doubt which governed all that was extra-sensory. Such in essence was the meaning of the sceptics' use of God's *potentia absoluta*.

This is borne out by the topics it governed: far from being applied indiscriminately to every question it was reserved for those in which faith and reason could proffer different answers. There is no evidence that it was applied either to purely theological problems, such as the relation of the Divine Persons to one another, or to problems which allowed of a fully empirical answer, such as questions of physics concerning the relation of bodies or the property of matter. The prevailing topics to which God's absolute power was addressed were grace and, less frequently, free future actions.

Each of these subjects was an aspect of the relation of free will to divine will. Grace dealt with free will's resources; future actions with its scope. Each of them was in a very real sense new: although they had played a very important part in St. Augustine's controversies with Pelagius, there were not then the same implications or issues. Moreover, among Ockham's followers, especially Robert Holcot, Thomas Buckingham, and Adam of Woodham, these two topics occupy a central place in their Commentaries on the Sentences. Similarly, among the opponents of the sceptics, of whom Thomas Bradwardine is the outstanding example, the same emphasis was laid upon grace and future actions. Even a thinker like Robert Halifax, although uninvolved in the disputes themselves, followed substantially the same arrangement in his Commentary. Ockham himself had pursued the full range of questions covered by the original Master of the Sentences, Peter Lombard¹⁴: grouped into four books they aimed to elucidate the fundamental problems of theology.¹⁵ Before long they had become a standard text for every student of theology; and a commentary on the original four books became part of the course for a Master of Theology. From the time of Ockham's Commentary the questions diminished in number and increasingly concentrated on free will.¹⁶ Thus not only was there a change in the questions raised, but also in the positions taken up over them: and it is in this sense that we can talk of a new climate of thought in the fourteenth century.

So far as grace was concerned, the issue revolved round the need, if any, of free will to possess a supernatural habit in order to achieve a good deed, remain free from sin, or gain God's glory in the next world. Tradition said that grace was necessary;¹⁷ the sceptics, applying the concept of God's absolute power, said that grace could be dispensed with and that man could do all that God required of him just as well without it.¹⁸ God's omnipotence was used to free man from God's own ordinances: and in keeping with the sceptics' emphasis on the limits of knowledge they were content to view man in natural and human terms and to dispense with dogma in discussing him. This not only excluded theology from the discussion, but also cast doubt on its tenets; for the sceptics, in their rejection of grace, further denied its inherent efficacy and its constant rôle in salvation.¹⁹ Consequently all standards and values went by the board; good and evil were not necessarily mutually exclusive; and salvation itself ceased to bear a direct relation to grace. It is not hard to see how such an attitude reduced all dogmatic teaching to a nullity, and prevented man's powers from being discussed

meaningfully except in natural terms, where knowledge could be put to the test of experience.

The same position is apparent over the freedom of the future actions of free will (future contingents). This raised the time-honoured problem — How God's immutable knowledge enabled what he foresaw to take place freely? That is, if God knows all things, past, present, and future, how can his creatures properly be said to have the power not to act? In the case of Socrates, for example, if God foresees all that Socrates will do and will not do, can Socrates enjoy real freedom in choosing his own actions? It would appear either that Socrates has his freedom violated by God's foreknowledge of what should rest with Socrates alone, or that, for the decision to rest entirely with Socrates, God cannot be a party to it before it takes place. Clearly such a problem involved the area of freedom that man had from God. Once the traditional mode of viewing man's relation to God had been rejected, the traditional solution also was no longer valid. Instead of regarding all that happened in this world (free will included) as the result of God's decree, the sceptics made an issue between God's will and free will. They refused to regard the future as the same as the present or the past. While both the latter, as already in existence, were determined, the future, as still to be, was not.²⁰ The temporal measurements of this world came before the concept of eternity as set forth in dogma. If the future were contingent how could God know it? Accordingly the sceptics never attempted to reconcile God's omnipotence with free future actions by man. Instead they tended to take one of two different alternatives. The first was that God, in order to remain omniscient, had to make his knowledge of contingencies, which might never occur, correspondingly contingent; otherwise he would be prejudging what had not yet been decided. Thus, as the price of knowing all that was to happen, God had to risk being wrong, therefore making revelation by his word fallible, since it referred to the future.²¹ The other alternative was to limit God's foreknowledge to what was certain, thereby obviating any threat to the certainty of revelation by regarding it as necessary knowledge.²² In either case the sacrifice of God's attributes to temporal and natural considerations is apparent. Since the future must exist, it cannot be doubted; but there was no corresponding certainty so far as God was concerned. Accordingly the mode of his knowledge had to be adapted to the practical consideration of the future's existence.

Each of these groups of questions had ramifications which extended beyond their immediate discussion. They constituted an attack

on theology which was bound not to go unanswered. So far, less is known about the opponents of scepticism than about the sceptics. The most outstanding anti-sceptic was Thomas Bradwardine, whose great treatise *De Causa Dei* was directed expressly to rebutting their assertions that free will was independent of grace or that God's foreknowledge was in any way dependent on or restricted by the free future actions of the human will.²³ *De Causa Dei* is chiefly interesting on two counts. Firstly, it was devoted to the twin questions of grace and future contingents, its subject dictated by the problems raised by the sceptics. Secondly, it is significant for the extreme views it propounded in reply. Bradwardine was not content simply to meet the sceptics on their own ground; he threw scorn on the very claim of reason to know or judge anything, least of all that which concerned God. In reply to their claims for free will, Bradwardine made theology and dogma the only touchstone. Where the sceptics had consigned God to the margins, in their emphasis on the natural and the human, Bradwardine left no room for anything but God. In effect Bradwardine answered the sceptics' one-dimensional outlook of the natural by the equally single dimension of the divine. The two sides were in head-on collision over the foundations of scholasticism.

II

Regarded in this way the disputes of the fourteenth century cannot be understood by the traditional categories. They were challenging the very concepts on which the latter were founded — namely the unity of faith and reason. This preoccupation with the place of the divine in the created gave to the disputes of the early fourteenth century their positive features, of which we may discern three.

The first was the replacement of the traditional systems, such as Augustinianism and Thomism, by the division into those thinkers who, following Ockham, refused to look beyond proof and practice for certain knowledge, and those who, like Bradwardine, made the authority of dogma the centre of all truth and knowledge. For want of better terms we may for convenience describe these two attitudes as scepticism and authority.

Secondly, there was the startling innovation of God's *potentia absoluta*. The importance of its use cannot be stressed too much, for it introduced a new dimension into the discussion. It constituted a destructive force which rendered unrecognizable not only the traditional landmarks of theology but also God himself. It was the core of fourteenth-century scepticism; it allowed anything to be possible and thus opened the floodgates to what had previously been

considered impossible, excluding nothing from consideration should God so will it.

Thirdly this gave rise to new questions and views, such as those already mentioned concerning grace and future contingents. It led to the recasting of the main concepts so that they bore little recognizable relationship to those of tradition. By the older standards most of the fourteenth century thinkers were eclectics who took their ideas where they could find them without following one system to the exclusion of all others. For them it was not primarily a matter of Nominalism or Realism, even though the problem of genera, species, and individuals was involved: Ockham, as has been suggested, was not simply concerned to reject any category but the individual from the strictly logical standpoint, but was governed equally by theology. Similarly, with Bradwardine, not only was *De Causa Dei* directed to the relation of the divine and human wills, to the virtual exclusion of everything else; his disavowal of reason cut at the roots of scholasticism. Even while they still employed much of the equipment and method of the thirteenth century, the thinkers of the fourteenth century were putting them to different use. They discussed God only to show that he could not validly be discussed; they related his will to free will only to show how impossible such a task really was; they employed the scholastic divisions and proofs in a way that denied the relevance of their traditional aims. To compare Ockham's view of God with, say, St. Bonaventure's, is to see that Ockham need not be discussing God at all. To examine the lengths to which Bradwardine went in asserting God's omnipotence is to realize how great a rejection of reason it constituted. Each side in the extreme degree to which it went in favour of the natural or the divine left no room for intermediaries; and even the place of the Church tended to be neglected.

The rise of scepticism and authority was, then, the central fact in the history of the thought of the first part of the fourteenth century. So far it has been virtually ignored since there is still too little evidence to provide a rounded picture of the period. Moreover the era of extreme unorthodoxy seems to have worked itself out by the 1360's. Nevertheless there can be no doubt about the preoccupation with the questions discussed above during the earlier period, nor of the extreme and novel positions to which they led. In the long run they were not without their effect. It is not too much to say that had there been no breach in the union between faith and reason during the early fourteenth century, there could have been no Renaissance or Reformation. Each of those movements, imprecise though they

may be, represented the separation of the natural and the supernatural and their development along their independent courses. The essence of what we call the Renaissance lay in its interest in the natural and the human, whether among its painters, its political theorists, or its men of science. Neither the *Prince*, nor the drawings and notes of Leonardo da Vinci, nor the scientific theories which issued in Galileo's discoveries, could have taken place within the limits of the medieval outlook. So long as revealed truth remained the touchstone of all inquiry, and everything had to be seen in relation to both its formal and its final causes, there could be no room for thorough-going experiment, which is the basis of science. Only with the break-up of the close-knit pattern of knowledge and belief did experiment become possible. The emphasis of the sceptics on verification of all experience tended in this direction, for it made natural causality the only yardstick, quite independent of theology. The same process was no less evident in political thought, where the rejection, by Ockham himself and by Marsiglio of Padua, of the political rôle of the Church, led to Machiavelli's total disregard of any but secular ends.

On the part of authority, no less, the position taken by Bradwardine of sole reliance on dogma to the exclusion of reason or natural experience tended to make theology self-sufficient. The Reformers, whatever their other differences, contrived to see theology as truth in itself; they, too, like Bradwardine, felt no need for the niceties of dispute, or for intermediaries, in knowing God. Whether this was to be by the personal experience which brought each man to God through the grace in his own soul, or by the eternal ordinances of God's decree, faith alone was necessary. Thus the different doctrines of the Reformation, whether of Luther or of Calvin, contained an important element of the outlook generated in the disputes of the early fourteenth century. They made the divorce which began then between theology and philosophy complete.

These are the general trends to which the fourteenth century divisions gave rise. No one would pretend that the links between them have been established conclusively, or that their full import has been clearly assessed. Nevertheless enough has been suggested to show how important these disputes were. They marked a change in direction for medieval thought; they pointed to the downward path on which the union between the divine and the created was to enter.

Manchester.

Gordon Leff.

NOTES

¹ K. Michalski, *Le problème de la volonté à Oxford et à Paris au XIV^e siècle* (Lemberg), *Les courants philosophiques à Oxford et à Paris au XIV^e siècle* (Bulletin de l'Académie Polonaise de Science et des lettres, 1920), *Le criticisme et le scepticisme dans la philosophie du XIV^e siècle* (ibid., 1925), *Les courants critiques et sceptiques dans la philosophie du XIV^e siècle* (ibid., 1927), *Les sources du criticisme et du scepticisme au XIV^e siècle* (ibid., 1928), *La physique nouvelle et les différents courants philosophiques au XIV^e siècle* (ibid., 1928).

² E. Gilson, *La Philosophie au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1947).

³ The following remarks are based primarily on the *De Causa Dei* of Thomas Bradwardine, and the Commentaries on the Sentences of Peter Lombard by William of Ockham, Durande de St. Pourçain, Robert Holcot, Thomas Buckingham, Adam of Woodham and Robert Halifax, most of whom lived and worked in the period following the death of Duns Scotus (1308), until the Black Death or shortly after. All of them, except for Bradwardine and Halifax, are taken as expressing broadly the same outlook, though most of them have still to be examined in detail. The main facts of their lives and opinions can be found in *La Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*; but for Buckingham and Halifax there are no printed references.

⁴ Gilson himself groups its thinkers under these headings, *op. cit.*

⁵ Most modern works speak of the fourteenth century as the period in which logical and technical terms predominated to the exclusion of their substance: e.g. Michalski and Gilson, *op. cit.*

⁶ See, for example, Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*, where scholasticism has come to be identified with arid hairsplitting and not with matters of importance.

⁷ See H. Denifle and E. Chatelain, *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis* (4 vols., Paris, 1889-97). Gilson was the first to recognize their significance, *op. cit.*, p. 559.

⁸ St. Thomas belonged to the Dominican order.

⁹ Duns Scotus has not provided historians of thought with the comparatively intelligible outlook of St. Thomas, due mainly to his early death while still formulating his ideas, the badly damaged state of the texts, and the peculiar subtlety of his thought; he was known as *doctor subtilis*. The latest work on him is E. Gilson, *Jean Duns Scotus* (Paris, 1952).

¹⁰ Gilson, *op. cit.*, has shown how Duns was reacting against the determinism of the Arab thinkers, such as Averroes. His proof of God's existence had nothing to do with cause or analogy, but was based on the purely abstract concept of being which God shared with everything in existence; from this Duns saw God as infinite being.

¹¹ There is no standard work on Ockham: he is too controversial a figure and he permits of too many different interpretations to make possible any generally accepted assessment. Moreover, it is only within the last two decades that he has come to be widely studied. L. Baudry, *Guillaume d'Occam; sa vie, ses oeuvres, ses idées*, provides a useful introduction and bibliography.

¹² *Sentences, Prologue*, p. 1 (Edn., Lyons, 1495).

¹³ See especially P. Vignaux, *Nominalisme au XIV^e siècle* (Paris, 1948), and Ph. Boehner, *Tractatus de praedestinatione et de praescientia dei et futuris contingentibus* (New York, 1945).

¹⁴ For an account of the Commentary on the Sentences see *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (art. Sentences) vol. 14 (Cols. 1860-84).

¹⁵ Bk. I dealt with God, Bk. II with His creatures, Bk. III with Christ, Bk. IV with the sacraments.

¹⁶ Of the original 182 distinctions and over 700 chapters Holcot had less than a dozen questions in no way corresponding to the arrangement in Lombard; Buckingham's Commentary numbered only six questions and was not even divided into separate books; Adam of Woodham had about 90 questions; Halifax, who only commented the first book and a fragment of the second, had nine questions. Of the above authors only Holcot and Buckingham are in printed editions — Lyons 1518 and Paris 1505.

¹⁷ See *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. 6.

¹⁸ Ockham, *Sentences*, Bk. I, dist. 17, and Bk. III, q. 5.; Holcot, *Sentences*, Bk. I, q. 1 and 4, and Bk. II, q. 1; Woodham, *Sentences*, Bk. I, dist. 17; and Buckingham, *Sentences*, q. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ This is the way Bradwardine poses the question in *De Causa Dei*, Bk. III, ch. 26, p. 702.

²¹ This was the path followed by Buckingham, *Sentences*, q. 3, and Woodham, *Sentences*, Bk. III, q. 2 and 3.

²² Holcot took this alternative in order to safeguard the infallibility of God's word, *Sentences*, Bk. II, q. 2.

²³ The full title, *De Causa Dei contra Pelagium et de virtute causarum*, clearly expresses Bradwardine's aim. Throughout the work he attacks his opponents as the *Pelagiani Moderni*, never naming them personally.