Thomas Aquinas and Alexander of Hales on the Subject Matter of Theology
Boyd Taylor Coolman
Boston College

This paper offers a historically contextualized perspective on Aquinas’ understanding of the subject matter of theology, as expressed in ST 1.1.7, through a close comparison with the view expressed in the “General Prologue” of the Summa fratri Alexandri or Summa Halensis associated with Alexander of Hales. In particular the paper will compare the different views offered by these two authors regarding the “formal object” (the ratio) of theology.

In Article 7 of the first question of the Summa Theologiae, Thomas criticizes some unnamed contemporaries for claiming that the subject matter of theology is “something other than God—that is, either things and signs; or the works of salvation; or the whole Christ, as the head and members.” Thomas does not wish to exclude such things altogether; but rather insists that they are to be treated in theology “in so far as they have reference to God.” At first glance, Thomas’ approach has similarities to “Alexander’s.” The Summa Halensis too insists that God is the proper subject matter, rather than “signs and things” or the “whole Christ,” etc. Yet, an important difference emerges here. While Thomas claims simply that God is the proper and formal object of theology, “Alexander” qualifies this claim by insisting that God is the proper object as “known through Christ in the work of restoration” (the latter phrase borrowed directly from Hugh of St. Victor as a way to refer to divine self-revelation in the economy of salvation). This qualification introduces into the Franciscan’s view an explicit Christological and salvation-historical orientation and hermeneutic to theological speculation, which seems absent from the Dominican’s.

In light of the foregoing, this paper will do three things: First, it will offer a close reading and exposition of both Thomas’ and “Alexander’s” texts on the subject matter of theology, expounding them in their own context, and also in relation to each other, noting differences and similarities. Second, it will ask whether the impression of the absence of a Christological and salvation-historical “key” to theological speculation in Thomas is borne out in his mature work as a whole. Third, the paper will ask what benefit each of these medieval paradigms might offer for modern retrieval, in light of the fact that the deep issue raised by this question is the perennial one of the relationship between metaphysics and history.