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**Hommage à David Burr / varia**

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## The Formation of Olivi's Intellectual Project

"Petrus Ioannis Olivi and the Philosophers" Thirty Years Later

**Sylvain Piron**

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# The Formation of Olivi's Intellectual Project

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- 1 The core of David Burr's achievement can be stated in a few words. He is the first scholar who has been able to give a comprehensive and unified view of someone whom he described, in his very first paper on him, as "a complex figure whose presence was felt in more than one field." To render full justice to both the historian and his subject, we may add that this figure, Peter John Olivi, also happens to be one of the most adventurous, exciting and prolific of all medieval thinkers. Throughout his tireless efforts, David Burr demonstrated qualities that more or less match those Olivi was expecting from his fellow Franciscans. The most striking one is certainly a fidelity to his own initial intuition, already expressed in the very first two papers he published in 1971: "The Apocalyptic Element in Olivi's Critique of Aristotle" and "Petrus Ioannis Olivi and the Philosophers"—the first being somehow an appendix to the second.<sup>1</sup> Both of them were a seminal influence for another fine presentation of Olivi given by François-Xavier Putallaz.<sup>2</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that, at his first attempt, David Burr managed to touch the very nerve of Olivi's intellectual constellation that previous scholarship had failed to identify. This is all the more striking when one looks back at the *status quaestionis* before the studies by David Burr and David Flood. Reading the very fine books written in their fields by Effrem Bettoni and Raoul Manselli, one may wonder whether they were really speaking about the same person.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, writing in 1984, Marjorie Reeves recognised that "professor Burr has demonstrated the continuity of [Olivi's] work," overcoming the commonplace notion that there would be an "element of schizophrenia in the apparent sharp divide" between the two sides of his oeuvre.<sup>4</sup>
- 2 My own research brought me back again to the same issue, while walking in David's footsteps and following his guidance in exploring areas where new investigations were most needed. In a footnote at the end of "The Date of Olivi's Commentary on Matthew," he referred to the lack of a global chronology of the *quaestiones* comprised within the

Olivian *Summa*, stating that “the story of their composition, when finally told, will be a complicated one.”<sup>5</sup> The hint looked promising. Indeed: it took about a year to sort out hundreds obscure cross-references between these texts. And once the maze was solved, the most interesting results were once again related to the question of philosophy. Three items in particular may be here brought to the fore.

- 3 The first one amounts to something like “contextualising Olivi’s aversions.” It is quite enlightening to realise that all the famous lines in which he is expressing his contempt for the authority of Aristotle appear, with no exception, in texts that belong to the same limited lapse of time. Olivi was not perpetually infuriated against the philosophers. Rather, he happened to be writing a series of questions on angels, the human person, the free will, the eternity of the world and other disputed topics<sup>6</sup> within months after the Parisian condemnation of March 1277. By then, in Narbonne, he also had at hand the *Correctorium fratris Thomae*. But instead of resting on the authority of the documents issued by Étienne Tempier or William de la Mare (both of whom are never explicitly referred to), he launched his own broadside attack on the errors of the philosophers. The adversaries are described as *sequaces Aristotelis* or *Averroistae* (and Olivi must be credited with being the first writer to make such an extensive use of that denomination). Still, Thomas Aquinas is certainly the figure in the background with whom he is mainly contending, while Arnaud Gaillard was probably the actual flesh and blood opponent of some of these questions that often take remarkably original positions. The vividness of his critique of the contemporary philosophers, reflecting a situation of crisis, should not overshadow the actual creative philosophical quality of these works. In contrast, we may note that a few years later, Olivi’s temper on this issue was more serene. In the long questions on cognition (Book II, q. 72-74) composed around 1282, he is able to discard Aristotle’s views without insulting him. Even more telling, the questions on the sensory powers, probably written shortly before 1283, are discussing the opinions of some “philosophantes” in a calm and collected way.<sup>7</sup> At the time, the critical point had moved on to the issue of poverty. It is on that field that Olivi was now using the same intonations, but still directing his assaults against the same person, Arnaud Gaillard (someone David Burr has been too prudent to identify under the veil of “brother Ar.”).
- 4 The second striking result, once the web of cross-references has been disentangled, is certainly more puzzling. The earliest surviving texts from Olivi appear to be of a strictly philosophical nature. On close inspection, the literary genre of these three unpublished questions cannot be described otherwise than as extracts from a lecture on Aristotle’s physics.<sup>8</sup> Once this surprising result is admitted, it helps in bringing out the significance of some developments in slightly later works, where Olivi is not simply rejecting Aristotle, but rather suggesting that there are other ways of understanding the Philosopher than the usual one. This argumentative strategy, which very much resembles the ockhamian one, is soon replaced by an apparent rejection of all reliance on Aristotle. But this attitude should not overshadow the fact that Olivi had a fairly good command of the Aristotelian corpus—and certainly a better one than the previous Franciscan generation did. Let us recall that this lecture on the *Physics* is one of the earliest Aristotelian commentaries given within a Franciscan convent for which we have any evidence.<sup>9</sup> More important even than this textual knowledge, is the familiarity with the *artista* methods Olivi is displaying. He often repeats, and puts into practice, that the argument of authority has no value in philosophy: “Aristotle said this, therefore this is true” is not a correct syllogism.<sup>10</sup> Instead of showing idolatrous

reverence to the ancient thinkers, in his view, philosophy should consist in proving them wrong by the use of the same rules of reason, and in establishing independent and better demonstrations of the same true results. We may find in this area some keys to explaining the underlying intellectual structures that made Olivi such an inventive mind.

- 5 It is of course very difficult to give a precise date for this lecture on the *Physics*; it was certainly delivered more than a year or two before 1277. It would be too adventurous to be more precise at that stage of the research, before these questions are properly edited. Still, I would like to propose a brief hypothesis that could help to better relate these questions to the rest of his works. Reading closely the famous methodological treatise *De perlegendis philosophorum libris*, once we know that Olivi actually read in the schools the books of the philosophers, one may ponder a moment about the proper nature of this document.<sup>11</sup> The notion that it would be part of a Commentary on I Corinthians, proposed long ago by C. Partee, can be easily discarded.<sup>12</sup> Instead, it would much more fruitful to see the work as some sort of initial scholastic *Collatio*, preparing the students for the forthcoming teaching. Comparisons with some of the *Principia* edited by David Flood and Gedeon Gàl are illuminating in that regard, especially the *principium De studio* which appears to be a preparation to lectures on the *Libri Sententiarum*.<sup>13</sup> Following that path, I would tend to think that, far from being a reproval of philosophical studies, this document should rather be understood as an introduction to an actual detailed study of philosophical books—be it for this lecture on the *Physics* or for another occasion.
- 6 The third point I would like to stress is less a result than a guess. It starts with a question. How long did Olivi stay as a student in Paris? It is in fact difficult to tell. As he was already present there in the Spring of 1267, the normal duration of four year for these studies wouldn't have provided the framework to remain long after 1271. But since we have no trace of his presence in Southern France before 1275-1277, there is still room to consider whether the sojourn in Paris may not have been slightly extended. As a matter of fact, a number of clues are pointing in that direction. In the first place, we may note the fairly good knowledge he has of works produced in Paris in that period. Most notably, Olivi appears to have known Henry of Ghent's *Sentence Commentary*, which was never properly published (Henry published instead a *Summa quaestionum*, the first part of which was made available in 1276), but circulated among a limited number of scholars in these years. Yet, the most decisive evidence for an extended stay would be to prove Olivi's attendance at the most distinguished parisian event of these years, the *Collationes in Hexamaeron* delivered by Bonaventure in the Spring of 1273 in front of the whole university. Both David Burr and Robert Lerner have remarked that, on some crucial points for his theology of history, Olivi has no other source than some Bonaventurian hints present in these *Collationes*.<sup>14</sup> For his part, Camille Bérubé has shown that on one issue, Olivi understood better what was Bonaventure's intention than did both of the *reportatores* thanks to whom the text of these lectures has been handed down to us.<sup>15</sup> Although he never explicitly mentions this text, much less his own presence at this reading, we can ascertain that he knew it well, for he made quickly an abundant use of it. For instance, some of the opening paragraphs of the *Principium "De Doctrina Scripturae"* (given in Montpellier, in the Fall 1279) are nothing but an abbreviation of passages from the first *Collatio*.<sup>16</sup> In the end, it

is tempting to understand Olivi's silence about that text as a sign of the importance it has had for the formation of his own mind.

- 7 Lack of positive evidence should not prevent the historian from making necessary hypothesis, when their heuristic value is shedding light on evidence that would otherwise remain unintelligible. I think such is the case here. After having hesitated for years, I am now convinced that the only way to make sense of the first two results I have presented—and beyond that, to trace in every detail the formation of Olivi's intellectual project—requires that we make the following hypothesis. In the Spring of 1273, the young *frater Petrus*, having by then the duty to teach Aristotle to his fellow students in the Paris convent, attended the *Collationes in Hexaameron*. And most of what he did henceforth was guided by this formative experience.
- 8 If we wish to grasp the unifying element in Peter John Olivi, we have to imagine him in such a situation. Indeed, our documentation shows that, in the following years, he took extremely seriously most of what Bonaventure was trying to convey in these extraordinary and sometimes enigmatic lectures: going back to the Scripture as the only firm basis for theology, doubting the authority of the philosophers and the *Summae magistrorum*, defending the Franciscan poverty and linking that experience with the dawning of a new era. On top of that, his philosophical abilities and training allowed Olivi to confront more directly with Thomas Aquinas, and with Aristotle himself. This, in turn sent him on a track that lead him away from some augustinian features, central to Bonaventure.
- 9 A full picture of these manifold perspectives stemming from a central experience would require much more time and space. Fully told, that narrative will not change greatly from the image of Olivi that David Burr has patiently constructed. In fact, it will be little more than elaborations on David's results. But most of all, this narrative will follow his example at trying to get the best focussed picture of Peter John Olivi, the elusive human person beyond written words. All in all, this is what I owe him most. The sensitivity David has shown in his approach of Olivi and the Spirituals, as individuals living in a complex world and in difficult times, has been the most important lesson I learned from the lectures he gave in Paris in 1996 at the invitation of Alain Boureau. In doing so, he was not doing much else than putting to use the famous sentence from Marc Bloch, that Jacques Le Goff likes to quote to his students: "Le bon historien ressemble à l'ogre de la légende. Là où il flaire la chair humaine, il sait que là est son gibier."<sup>17\*</sup>

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## NOTES

1. David Burr, "The Apocalyptic Element in Olivi's Critique of Aristotle," *Church History*, 40, 1971, p. 15-29 ; Id., "Petrus Ioannis Olivi and the Philosophers," *Franciscan Studies*, 31, 1971, p. 41-71.
2. François-Xavier Putallaz, *Insolente liberté. Controverses et condamnations au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Cerf/Fribourg, Presses universitaires, 1995, p. 126-162.

3. Effrem Bettoni, *Le dottrine filosofiche di Pier di Giovanni Olivi. Saggio*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 1959; Raoul Manselli, *La "Lectura super Apocalipsim" di Pietro di Giovanni Olivi. Ricerche sull' escatologismo medioevale*, Roma, Istituto storico italiano per il Medio evo, 1955.
4. Marjorie Reeves, "The Development of Apocalyptic Thought: Medieval Attitudes," in C. A. Patrides & Joseph Wittreich, eds, *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature. Patterns, Antecedents, and Repercussions*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 56.
5. David Burr, "The Date of Olivi's Commentary on Matthew," *Collectanea Franciscana* 46, 1976, p. 138, n. 46.
6. From the second book of the Summa (*Quaestiones in secundum librum Sententiarum*, ed. B. Jansen, Quaracchi, 1922-1926, henceforth cited as *II Sent.*), these are mainly q. 4-6, 16, 22, 27-28, 33-37, 50-51, 57-58.
7. Cf. *II Sent.*, q. 63, t. 2, p. 596; q. 64, p. 602; q. 65, p. 607.
8. Full demonstration in Sylvain Piron, "Les œuvres perdues d'Olivi : essai de reconstitution," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, 91 (3-4), 1998, p. 380-385.
9. The only clear precedent is Thomas of Bungey who commented on the *De caelo*, in Oxford, around 1270.
10. *II Sent.*, q. 27, t. 1, p. 479: "Est que periculosus modus arguendi in fide dicere 'Aristoteles non posuit hoc, ergo non est ita,' aut hec 'Aristoteles hoc dixit, ergo est ita;' hoc enim est occulte et etiam aperte astruere quod Aristoteles est regula infallibilis omnis veritatis;" *II Sent.*, q. 53, t. 2, p. 225: "Et breviter hic et ubique habe pro regula quod dicere 'Aristotele et eius Commentator ita dixit, ergo ita est' non habet vim argumenti, quia nullo habitudine necessaria est inter conclusionem et premissas; sed si rationem pro illa conclusione fecerunt, dicatur ratio, et si bona est concedatur, si vero falsa pro viribus dissolvatur."
11. Ferdinand Delorme, ed., "Fr. Petri Joannis Olivi Tractatus de perlegendis philosophorum libris," *Antonianum*, 16, 1941, p. 31-44.
12. Carter Partee, "Peter John Olivi: Historical and doctrinal study," *Franciscan Studies*, 20, 1960, p. 258, n. 5. What remains of the commentary on I Corinthians has been published by David Flood & Gedeon Gál, eds, *Peter John Olivi on the Bible. Principia quinque in sacram Scripturam. Postilla in Isaiam et in I ad Corinthios*, St. Bonaventure (NY), Franciscan Institute Publications, 1997, p. 350-364. The text is unfinished, and postdates the *Lectura super Apocalipsim*, whereas the *De perlegendis* is present in a manuscript which predates 1283 (Borgh. 358).
13. D. Flood & G. Gál, eds, *Peter John Olivi on the Bible...*, p. 19-33.
14. David Burr, *Olivi's Peaceable Kingdom. A Reading of the Apocalypse Commentary*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, p. 104, 116; Robert Lerner, "Peter Olivi on the Conversion of the Jews," in A. Boureau & S. Piron, eds, *Pierre de Jean Olivi (1248-1298). Pensée scolastique, dissidence spirituelle et société*, Paris, Vrin, 1999, p. 210, n. 5.
15. Camille Bérubé, *De la philosophie à la sagesse chez saint Bonaventure et Roger Bacon*, Roma, Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1976, p. 243-244, 255-257.
16. *Principium* 3, ed. in *Peter John Olivi on the Bible*, p. 78-79, § 4-5 abbreviates Bonaventura, *Collationes in Hexaameron*, in *Opera omnia*, t. 5, Quaracchi, 1891, coll. 1, p. 331, § 11.
17. Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1993 (1st ed. 1949), p. 51.
- \*. Vicki-Marie Petrick has gently provided linguistic corrections of the original draft.

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## AUTHOR

**SYLVAIN PIRON**

École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris.  
Groupe d'anthropologie scolastique