

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

## JOHN DUNS SCOTUS

TONY LANE, LONDON BIBLE COLLEGE

The beatification of the Scottish Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus (1265/6-1308) in March 1993 is not an event that should pass unnoted by the *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*. Despite attempts in the past to claim him for Ireland, it is now universally agreed that John was born in Scotland, probably in the town of Duns. The Franciscans of Cologne celebrated the seven-hundredth anniversary of his birth by erecting a statue of him in the park at Duns. This sculpture has been described as 'striking', though how it strikes one may well depend upon one's view of modern art.

If England's most famous medieval theologian gave his name to a razor, Scotland's had the misfortune to donate his to a dunce's cap. This slander takes its origin from the sixteenth-century humanists and Reformers, who found his theology too obscure for their liking. His own contemporaries were more appreciative and called Duns the 'Subtle Doctor'.

1993 is the year of the single market. Duns' career is a good illustration of a time when Western Europe was in a real sense a single community. On his tomb at Cologne there is engraved a Latin poem:

*Scotias me genuit – Anglia me suscepit,  
Gallia me docuit – Colonia me tenet.*

Scotland gave birth to me – England received me,  
France taught me – Cologne retains me.

We have already seen that Duns was born in Scotland. The sense in which England received him is less certain. There is no clear evidence as to where he studied prior to his ordination in 1291, though the tradition that some of that time was spent at Oxford is plausible. But the chief credit for his education is given to Paris, the then centre of the western theological world. It is certain that Duns studied there from 1294 to 1297 and it may be that some of his earlier studies were also conducted in Paris. He went on to teach at Paris in the early fourteenth century, commenting on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. It seems that he had already lectured on the

*Sentences* at Cambridge and Oxford and he returned to Oxford to lecture during a year spent away from Paris in 1305-6, for political reasons. In 1307 politics again drove Duns from Paris and he went to Cologne where he taught. There he died and was buried, thus being 'retained' by that city.

That the *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* should commemorate Duns the Scot seems appropriate. But what about the *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*? If Duns was the 'Subtle Doctor', he was also the 'Marian Doctor'. Theologically he is famous especially for having put forward what became the decisive argument for the doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception. The predominant view at the time was that Mary had been freed from sin after her conception, but before her birth. It was Duns who began to turn the tide in favour of the view that Mary was cleansed from sin from the very moment of conception. The major objection to this doctrine was that it seemed to leave Mary without the need of redemption, contrary to her own words (Luke 1:47). Duns argues that the issue concerns not Mary's need of redemption, but the timing of it. Mary, he suggests, was saved from actually contracting sin, rather than being cleansed from it after having contracted it. He argued that it is more perfect to preserve someone from original sin than to liberate them from it after they have contracted it – just as it would be better to prevent someone from falling into the river than to pull them out of the river after they have fallen in. Jesus Christ is the perfect redeemer, says Duns, so he must have redeemed someone in the most perfect way possible – and whom more fittingly than his own mother?

Duns claimed only to have demonstrated the probability of the immaculate conception. But he also argued that given a number of possibilities, all consistent with Scripture and tradition, that one is to be chosen which ascribes the greatest glory to Mary. This approach was not accepted by all, and so began centuries of dispute within the Roman Catholic Church. The Franciscans adopted the view of their illustrious doctor, John of Duns. Their rivals the Dominicans held to the view of their doctor, Thomas Aquinas, which was the older view of Anselm, Bernard and Bonaventure, that Mary was cleansed after her conception. So fierce became the dispute that in 1483 Pope Sixtus IV declared that the Church had not decided on

the matter and that neither view was heretical. It was not until 1854 that Pope Pius IX was able, in his bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, to pronounce that the doctrine of the immaculate conception 'has always existed in the church as a doctrine that has been received from our ancestors and that has been stamped with the character of revealed doctrine'.

Evangelicals are unlikely to be convinced by Duns' argument. Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned here about the danger of *a priori* thinking in theology. This is not a danger that ceased with the end of the middle ages. Today we often hear *a priori* arguments about what a God of love may or may not do with those who reject him. Again, there are *a priori* arguments concerning the implications of the Bible being God's Word. In a particular culture and among those who share common presuppositions it is often these *a priori* arguments that carry the greatest weight. In the longer term, however, it is often these very same arguments that least convince future generations.

How should late-twentieth-century Evangelicals relate to a medieval theologian who was in large measure responsible for the emergence of a doctrine with which they have little sympathy? One approach has been to regard Duns as a forerunner of the Reformation and, in particular, of the teaching of John Calvin. It has been argued for some time that Calvin's theology has a strong Scotist element to it. More recently, T.F. Torrance has traced Calvin's intellectual pedigree back through his older Scottish contemporary John Major (sic!) to John Duns Scotus with, as a concession to the brethren south of the border, an intermediate role for William of Ockham. The specific claims made for Major (or Mair) have failed to win wide approval. But recent studies have served to emphasise the importance of Calvin's medieval background. Reformed theology was not created *ex nihilo*, but rather evolved out of late medieval theology by means of some creative genetic mutations. Scotus was undoubtedly a major contributor to the medieval theology which was the cradle of Reformed theology.

Scotus' writings will never become widely read. Even his contemporaries found them difficult to follow. Apart from the question of style, Duns died young, before he was able to write a *Summa Theologiae*. His extant works include two

commentaries on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, but unfortunately he died before he was able to complete the revision of the second and more important of these. The Subtle Doctor's writings score badly on accessibility, but it is a mark of his greatness (to say nothing of the potential that was terminated by a premature death) that he is still today considered a major theologian and that the Pope has pronounced him a 'Doctor of the Church'.

### **For Further Study**

James B. Torrance and Roland C. Walls have recently authored a booklet *John Duns Scotus Doctor of the Church*, in the Nutshell series of the Handsel Press (Edinburgh, 1992).

Those who wish to go further could start by consulting standard dictionaries and encyclopedias. There are two useful books in English, though neither may be readily available in the UK. There is a translation of an older Italian book: E. Bettoni, *Duns Scotus: The Basic Principles of his Philosophy* (Washington, DC; Catholic University of America Press, 1961). There is also a symposium of papers commemorating the 700th anniversary of his birth: J.K. Ryan and B.M. Bonansea (eds.), *John Duns Scotus, 1265-1965* (Washington, DC; Catholic University of America Press, 1965).

There is a critical edition of Duns' writings, edited by C. Balic (Vatican City Press, 1950ff.). Not many of his works have been translated, but there is a selection edited by Allan Wolter: *Duns Scotus, Philosophical Writings* (Edinburgh, Nelson, 1962). The same editor, with Felix Alluntis, has edited *God and Creatures. The Quodlibetal Questions* (Princeton University Press, 1975).