

## Concise church biographies

### William of Ockham [c. 1285-1347]

William of Ockham (or Occam) was a British Franciscan monk and a theologian-philosopher who criticised the pope and was excommunicated. He developed an anti-papal theory of the state, denying the pope any secular authority.

He entered the Franciscan order in about 1310 and studied at Oxford between 1318 and 1324. A dispute had arisen between Pope John XXII and the Spiritual Franciscans. William identified with the Spirituels and condemned the Pope, whereupon he was summoned to Avignon in 1324 to answer charges of heresy. Upon being excommunicated in 1328, he was protected in the court of the Emperor Louis IV of Bavaria in Munich. While working for Louis he wrote works about the relation of the church to the state.

Between 1317 and 1328 in Oxford and Avignon he wrote his theological and philosophical works. He criticised accommodating Aristotle to theology that had been established in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Aquinas and others to attempt to reconcile faith with reason. Franciscan scholars (e.g. Duns Scotus, Bonaventura) supported Christian theology by destroying Aristotelian philosophy. But these systems depended on Realism, which Ockham rejected on the grounds of empiricism (the base of knowledge is the direct experience of individual things – Nominalism).

He strongly defended the doctrines of God's sovereignty, omnipotence and freedom. He thought that God was above knowledge and cannot be apprehended by reason (as Aquinas taught). God can only be known by faith.

He enabled the development of formal logic, eliminated the concept of 'universals' (thus only individual things exist), and criticised Realism,<sup>1</sup> preparing the ground for a more scientific approach to reality. He was a significant independent thinker whose Nominalism was of great significance to science by teaching that natural phenomena can be investigated rationally.

His form of Nominalist philosophy saw God as beyond human powers of reasoning, and things as provable only by experience or by scriptural authority. Reason could not discover truths about God and faith; these come by revelation and personal experience. Faith and reason cannot be reconciled. His teaching fed mysticism.

He is famous for his maxim, '*Ockham's razor*', that the fewest possible assumptions should be made in explaining a thing.

Martin Luther considered himself a follower of Ockham.

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<sup>1</sup> Realism here is the medieval idea of universals, or abstract concepts, that have a real existence apart from the individuals who embody them. This is based on Plato's physics instead of Nominalism.