

# PIETRO POMPONAZZI – THE MOST REPRESENTATIVE ARISTOTELIAN OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

Anna MAKOLKIN<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** *In European cultural history, the name of Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525) is associated with the re-birth of the ancient pagan Graeco-Roman cultural legacy and the revival of the ancient natural philosophy, as well with the debate over the power of Man and God. He is also one of the most prominent neo-Aristotelians of the Renaissance who promoted Aristotle's natural philosophy, contrasted with the thought of Plato, thus continuing the ongoing comparative analysis of Platonism and Aristotelianism.*

*Pomponazzi who claimed that "a philosopher has to be a heretic" entered European cultural history as a truly radical thinker, having turned his advocacy of Aristotle into a weapon against the Church dogma, Mediaeval scholasticism, theological main arguments, and religion in general. The Renaissance neo-Aristotelianism is unthinkable without Pomponazzi's battle for the materiality of cosmos and human body, without his denunciation of the immortality of the soul – the main premise of Christian ideology and mythology – that was going on nearly a100 years prior to the burning of Giordano Bruno. This paper brings to the surface of the current philosophical discourse this less known but an extremely significant Renaissance thinker, an alumnus of the University of Padua, "the cradle of Aristotelianism" during the High Renaissance.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Aristotle, Aristotelianism, natural philosophy, organic essence, Faith, Reason, heresy, heretic, Plato(nism), immortality of the soul, religious myth, Cosmos*

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<sup>1</sup> University of Toronto.

*Religion breeds wickedness and has  
given rise to wrongful deeds  
Lucretius, De rerum natura*

## Introduction

The label, “the most representative Aristotelian of the Italian Renaissance,” was coined by Paul Oskar Kristeller, one of the leading students of the Italian and European Renaissance, in his 1967-lecture. His student Martin Pine would name Pietro Pomponazzi “the most radical philosopher of the Renaissance” (1986). This paper not only presents the image of Pomponazzi, his views on Cosmos and Man, but also evokes the cultural context which made him a radical thinker and a noted Renaissance neo-Aristotelian. Our recourse to Pomponazzi is particularly proper and significant during the current postmodern resurgence of the religious that has opened the old intellectual wounds, having renewed the battle for the minds and souls of people who should have resolved by now the problems of God and Man, but it regrettably has not happened. In this regard, Aristotle and neo-Aristotelians of all times are as relevant as before, including Pietro Pomponazzi who carried the torch of secularism and materialism, natural philosophy and who passionately defended human sacred right to think freely and critically in the presence of the powerful Church and the religious crusades for “the right god” and most correct religious ritual.

### 1. Biography of a Heretic

Pietro Pomponazzi (1462–1525), a native of Mantua, educated at the University of Padua from where he obtained both of his Doctorates, in Arts (1487) and in Medicine (1495), started his academic career at the same institution, by teaching such major Aristotle’s texts as *De Anima*, *De Cielo*, *Physics* and *Meteorology* (M.Pine, 1986:44). “The Mantuan,” as Pomponazzi was fondly called, soon became known as a passionate Aristotelian, his lectures were very popular and he was liked by his students. In 1496, he left Padua for Ferrara where he taught privately for the Court of Ferrara and studied under Alberto Pio. In 1499, Pomponazzi was recalled to Padua where he remained until 1509. Then he again was invited by the Duke of Ferrara to head the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Ferrara but this post lasted only for one academic year due to the war and closure of the University [F.Borsetti in M.Pine, 1986:45]. Then he returned to Padua for another year and was invited to teach at the University of Bologna where he taught until his death in 1525.

In 1518, Pomponazzi attained two honors: he was freed from the obligation of lecturing with concurrents (something which all beginning professors had to endure for a while) and was given an opportunity to choose his own instruction materials and specific texts “which he wished to expound in his lectures” [ibid.:46]. This freedom and intellectual autonomy came to Pomponazzi after years of being “an effective teacher” and a series of confrontations with various university authorities in Bologna, Pisa, Florence and Padua. Once the University of Bologna even froze his bank deposits when he wanted to move to another city and those were released only after the interference by Marchese of Mantua (ibid. ibid.). Freezing of his bank funds was

a nuisance and a minor punishing measure. Eventually, his famed major work *De immortalitate animae* (1516) was condemned to public burning in Venice. The Papal warning was given on June 13th, 1518, after the inquiry into the blasphemous book “against faith” conducted by Cardinal Legate Giulio de Medici. The Church authorities wanted to know who had authorized the publication because in Bologna such an act would be illegal. 1516-19 were the years of public denunciation of Pomponazzi by his university colleagues and by the Church fathers, and were wasted on defending his own name in print.

Thanks to the positive intervention of Cardinal Pietro Bembo, the heresy proceedings were stopped but Pomponazzi’s important works, such as *De incantationibus* and *De fato* “would be published only posthumously, in 1556 and 1567 respectively” [ibid.,:47]. Pomponazzi had to endure brutal attacks on his views, mockery of his philosophical choices and condemnation of his consistent promotion of Aristotelianism not only by the Church Fathers, but also by his colleagues, neo-Platonists. Among the most vehement opponents and ideological foes was Agostino Nifo who took Pomponazzi’s post at Padua and who was playing the key role in the entire notorious **immortality controversy**. Pomponazzi bravely fought against his ideological opponents, neo-platonists, believers or pretenders to believe in god, unwilling to compromise his materialistic/Aristotelian outlook on Nature, Cosmos, cosmic Order and Man in it. Numerous historians attributed to Pomponazzi the saying, “in philosophy, it is necessary to be a heretic” [M.Pine, 1986:18; Oliva, Cesare, 1926:274]. According to Bruno Nardi, Pomponazzi “indeed pushed his rational insights further than most other Renaissance Aristotelians” [ibid.,:18].

## 2. Italy – the most Preserved Archive of Aristotelianism

Italy, the former heart of the Roman Empire that completed the ascent of Europe as a civilization, remained the cultural avant-garde up until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was famous for the freest atmosphere of thought, the most perfect art and aestheticism, creativity, sophisticated governance, urbanity and, thus, the most conducive atmosphere for the cultivation of sciences and philosophy. Even upon adoption of Christianity, Italy had sustained a unique or even paradoxical condition of duality – the secular and theological were in a state of unusual social symbiosis. The heirs of pagan secular Rome continued to look at religion with their characteristic condescension, the same way their forefathers did in antiquity. Anti-clericalism in Renaissance Italy was quite prominent. According to Gene Brucker, “The Priest was a figure of contempt, menace to the community” [1969:180]. The cultural past fostered the paradoxical existential tradition of a **split cultural identity** – secular/religious – and a cultural expression when pagan and Christian attitudes, values and modes of thinking co-existed side by side. Italy’s Universities were the oldest in Europe, attracting numerous students from various countries, were the only ones that did not have the faculties of theology, censoring the curriculum; the powerful Catholic church did not have dominance in the academe. The Italian Renaissance was not only embodied in the names of Giotto, Cavalcanti, Dante, Massaccio, Boticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Rafael and Caravaggio, but also it was

characterized by the intense scientific research Italy's cultural climate was the richest in Europe and the best minds gravitated towards it, next to artists and aspiring composers. The Italian Universities, the first in Europe, had been the conservatories of scientific discoveries.

Italy was the first to have initiated the transmission of Greek philosophy in Europe, and particularly Aristotelianism, contrary to the modern mythology about the Arabic transmission ("the Arabs had given Aristotle back to Europeans"), having received it from Byzantine and earlier from Romans studying in Greece. Even Cicero studied Aristotle and Greek philosophy in Athens. Later, monks, priests and scholars, migrating from Athens, Alexandria, Syria, Asia Minor and Constantinople came to Rome with the flow of the ongoing migration. Eventually, all these treasures became the cultural property of Italy and the depositories of her rich museums, libraries and universities. Due to the specific cultural circumstances, it was possible in Italy to hold variety of views and preserve different religious traditions – to maintain Christian or even Hebrew rituals next to the pagan ones, to be an atheist, follow Plato or Aristotle. The Italian Universities had the departments of Hebrew and Greek studies, as well as natural philosophy of Aristotle. Italian cultural climate continued to foster the old Roman traditions of free thought. Dialogue was maintained and cultivated more extensively and profoundly than anywhere in Europe. The Italian were eager to remember their own multicultural secular Roman past and examine it freely and broadmindedly. The legacy of Athens was cherished and studied next to Ovid, Cicero, Virgil, Lucretius ... Passionate atheists, materialists, atomists, Platonists, neo-Platonists, Averroists, Thomists and Aristotelians, neo-Aristotelians, Hebrew revisionists and adjustors of Judaism and Christianity – all had been living side by side up to the Renaissance [P.O.Kristeller,1996;1979].

Italy's Renaissance was not the only period when antiquity was at the centre or when Aristotle was at the focus of the scholarly debates. It was simply intensified during the 1200–1600 century, with the development of arts, science and the renewed interest in Man, his creative powers, Intellect, as well as his place in Cosmos. However, this period saw not only the intense explosion of creativity but also the intensified battle between Faith and Reason, the intensified religious fanaticism and attacks on Reason. This was the era that also gave birth to Pietro Pomponazzi as a staunch advocate of secularism and Aristotle, natural philosopher and the atheist of antiquity. It is interesting that Pomponazzi, a Renaissance neo-Aristotelian, could express himself next to Ficino, a fanatical neo-Platonist, and how these contrasting views could be at the centre of Italy's discourse and in the curriculum of the most prominent Italian Universities where the Dominicans and members of the Franciscan Order also had a voice, next to the lay Aristotelians and atheists.

### **3. Padua – Pomponazzi's *Alma Mater***

The city of Padua came to be known both for its secular spirit and as the "citadel of scholastic Aristotelianism" [Jill, Kaye, 2002:VI,100]. P.Kristeller brings the following fact from Padua's history to prove his point:

*When Petrus de Vineus addressed the citizens of Padua in the name of Emperor Frederick II, so we are told by the chronist, he began his speech with a line from Ovid as his theme*

[P.Kristeller, 1979:238; A.Hilub Hortis, Trieste, 1874:311]

The University of Padua, like all others, had no Department of Theology, nor did it have the tradition of referring to the Christian theologians, but, as it appears, the city of Padua had a quite pronounced secular Roman cultural tradition and Ovid was still regarded as a cultural icon. Herman Randall distinguished the role of the Paduan University among others in Italy, as far as framing European and Italian scholarly minds, training them in sciences and medicine (1961). It happened due to the popularity of the ancient materialism in general, and of Aristotle's natural philosophy in particular among the Paduan professors and students. The best medical doctors in Italy had been trained in Padua, as well as the most numerous Italian neo-Aristotelians of the Renaissance, with Pomponazzi among them.

The free and broad Paduan University curriculum framed Pomponazzi's mind, having trained him for his academic career and ultimately for shaping him into a "heretic" philosopher and ardent transmitter of Aristotle's teaching. Since medicine was the most solid department at Padua, the university never abandoned offering courses on Aristotle, paving the way to the modern sciences. Martin Pine distinguishes three major influences upon Pomponazzi's scholarly interests and views during his first years, between 1484 and 1487 – Francesco Neritone, Professor of Thomistic Metaphysics, Pietro Trapolino, Professor of Natural philosophy, and Pietro Rocabonella, Professor of Medicine. One can see that Pomponazzi's training (both at the Faculty of Arts and Medicine) was similar to that of Aristotle himself who was also qualified in both areas. Pomponazzi's future conflicts with the colleagues-Platonists and with the Church Fathers, and Christian theologians stem from his materialistic approach to the natural phenomena, and his denial of the divine intervention.

The Aristotelian studies at the Paduan science-oriented University curriculum had acquired a solid place and tradition. The University was founded in 1222. By the 1484, the time when Pomponazzi came to Padua, he had the opportunity to study numerous translations and commentaries on Aristotle, accumulated from the Greek, Byzantine, Latin and Arabic sources over the centuries. Originally a Law School, the University of Padua had been transformed into a prominent multidisciplinary institution, with such leading fields as Medicine, Astronomy, Natural philosophy, Biology, Physics and Chemistry. It would be also the *alma mater* of such outstanding scholars and scientists as Galileo Galilei, Nicolaus Copernicus, Gabriele Fallopio, Andreas Vessalius – all of whom benefitted from the old intellectual traditions at Padua and academic freedom of this renowned institutions that fostered free inquiry, debate and daring intellectual pursuits since the Middle Ages, and clearly along the Aristotelian mode of inquiry.

#### 4. Aristotle in Italy

The Aristotelian studies in Italy had never been interrupted since the Roman times, having gained particular prominence in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, having become then the central parts of the general university curriculum, along with the natural philosophy, medicine, biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics. The Italian Renaissance or rebirth of the pagan Graeco-Roman antiquity during 1300-1600 brought back to the surface pagan thinking, materialistic philosophy, and with it the re-interpretation of Aristotle who had never disappeared from the Italian cultural horizon. The Italian favorable cultural and intellectual climate of the Renaissance simply induced the separation of Aristotle's teaching from the Medieval scholasticism which had appropriated his concepts for the promotion of their own religious ideology and their own interpretation of human existence and its connection to cosmos via the divine. According to Jill Kraye, "the scholastic commentary of Aristotle was a part of the legacy bequeathed to the Renaissance by the Middle Ages" [2002,VI:141]. But teaching of Aristotle, as per Paul Oskar Kristeller, was pursued on a very large scale at least with the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This teaching was connected with that of medicine and theology which applied Aristotle both to the Biblical exegesis and ideology of Christianity (1974:44). The University of Padua and Florence did not even offer theology course every year (1974:33). The Graeco-Roman pagan traditions, the cultural foundation of the Roman Empire, had never been erased in Italy, even with the advent of Christianity and birth of theology. The Italians, the heirs of the Roman Empire, were still being raised on Ovid, Virgil, Seneca, Cicero and Lucretius, having to live with the **split cultural and existential identity** even in the post-Christian times, from the 4<sup>th</sup> up to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. And Aristotle had been a permanent part of this split Italian cultural identity, sustained by the ongoing translation and re-translations of his works from Greek into Latin, as well as from the selective Arabic commentaries and translations from Greek. The Roman past could never be destroyed as the **cultural foundation**.

The memory of the pagan Rome, and with it the awareness about Aristotle, had always posed a challenge for the scholastic philosophers, the Church Fathers and the Catholic Church in particular, who had to invent the ways of keeping the religious myth alive in new cultural context and in the process of the advancement of sciences and general knowledge. The Italian Renaissance signaled not only the triumph of human imagination and creativity, but also the triumph of Intellect over Faith, at least temporarily, the victory of secularism over the religious dogmatism. Dante's *Divine Comedy* embodied this triumph. Despite the protestations of most Dante modern scholars, this work was **a metaphoric denunciation of religion** in general, and a gesture of rebellion against the Catholic establishment in particular. In the area of philosophy, the blatant juxtaposition of Platonism and Aristotelianism in favor of the latter became prominent in the intellectual debates on Italian university campuses, in scholarly literature and daily press. It demanded new society, with the restored secular concepts of antiquity, values and conceptual principles, essentially based on Aristotelianism. The traditional free Italian spirit had always kept **Dialogue** and **Debate** alive but it was particularly intensified during the Renaissance, from the 11<sup>th</sup>

century on. The individuals and institutions had been openly proclaiming their positions. But the affiliations and preferences had been divided across Italy – if Florence became the centre of neo-Platonism, Padua chose neo-Aristotelianism, and all Renaissance intellectuals subscribed to two different major conceptual systems. Poet, philosopher Petrarch (1304–1374) sang, for instance, panegyric to Plato in his *Triumph of Fame*, according Aristotle a distant place:

Volsimi da man manca, e vidi Plato  
 Che in quella schiera ando piu press al segno  
 Al quale aggiunge, ciu dal cielo e dato.  
 Aristotle, poi pien d'alto indegno  
 (Leaning to me is heaven and Plato appears  
 Who in his sphere moves and sends a sign  
 Which helps to decipher what's in the sky  
 Then adding to what is given,  
 Aristotle appears, undeservingly full of fame  
 [Italian text in E.Cassirer, 1963:15].

The neo-Platonists accepted the dominance and rule of the church and were prepared to compromise the Intellect for the sake of Faith and allegiance to the powerful class. It was essentially **an obscurantist submission to the Religious** and betrayal of Reason. The students and scholars at Padua whose focus was on Medicine, Biology, Physics, Chemistry and Natural philosophy embraced Aristotle, openly defending their materialist and secular position. The Paduan focus on Nature was logically and organically intertwined with the Natural Philosophy of Aristotle, a physician and philosopher, and it found its reflection in the curriculum at the University of Padua and the research interests of the scholarly community. Pietro Pomponazzi who chose to pursue his studies and eventually his academic career at Padua was able to follow the established traditions and continue to promote Aristotelianism. By the time Pomponazzi arrived in Padua, his future *alma mater* had already had nearly two centuries of Aristotle studies and was cognizant of millennium of different commentaries on Aristotle and different perspectives of analysis of his teaching. The continuity of Aristotelian scholarship in Italy was secured by the centuries-old ongoing ties between Athens, Naples, Alexandria, and Rome, the volumes of translations from Greek, Syriac, Aramaic and Arabic into Latin. Aristotle's treatises influenced Cicero, the Byzantine jurists, policy makers, and later, Christian theologians, historians, governors and Church leaders. The pagans and Christians had been living with Aristotle for centuries, absorbing his practical wisdom, scientific insights, and philosophy.

Contrary to the historical mythology, the Greek texts had never disappeared, the scholars insisted on going back to the original Aristotle, transmitted by migrant scholars, lay men, monks and priests. The first Latin text had been allegedly made by Wilhelm Morbeck in 1260 AD and was first published in Venice in 1498 as per V.Bibikhin [1983:760]. But Cicero (106-43 BC) who studied Aristotle in Athens and was bilingual, fluent in both Greek and Latin, already advocated the transmission of

Aristotle in his time among the Romans. Thus, translations go far back to the pre-Christian times.

### 5. Pomponazzi's Blasphemous Concept of the Soul

Pomponazzi started and ended his academic career with teaching Aristotle and commenting on his works, as much as it had been tied to the cardinal questions of Christianity. He enjoyed and benefitted from the favorable free-spirited climate at University of Padua and that of the Italian Renaissance in general. It enabled him to participate in the popular in those days debate over the existence of God and immortality of the soul. Christianity seduced most believers precisely with the myth of immortality, the eternal life, having utterly re-defined the purpose and meaning of life. Here and Now meant not much but the promise of Then and After completely altered and re-described life and human society. The promise of eternal life minimized the function of Reason in one's life time, absolutely contradicting the biological reality and functioning of an organism – according to common, as well as biological and medical knowledge, body stops functioning after death and decay is a normal phase of life in any living form. The Renaissance philosophers and scientists had to face and participate in the irrational debate, the so-called “battle for the soul,” actively pursued by many well educated and rather sophisticated thinkers, during 1300-1600 AD, who could not accept the myth of immortality and were not willing to accept Faith as an existential credo. This, in turn, energized and inspired the neo-Aristotelians to revisit Aristotle's work *De Anima* taught at major Italian Universities and revive the debate on the material essence of the soul.

Pomponazzi not only taught *De Anima* since the very beginning of his career, i.e. since 1487-88, but he also made the Discourse on the Soul the central argument against Platonism and Christianity, basing his arguments on the Aristotelian premises and his materialism. For Aristotle, it was important to separate man from animals, then, to dwell on the intellectual component of human life. He consistently emphasized the distance between humans and animals. In book III of *De Anima*, Aristotle argued that

The soul of animals is characterized by two faculties, the faculty of discrimination which is the work of thought and sense, and the faculty of originating the local movement [1984, vol.I:687].

If animals were capable of using thought and sense and plan local movement, according to Aristotle, humans were able to do the same, but even on a more sophisticated level. Similarly to Aristotle, Pomponazzi believed that soul was in the body and was a force to be destroyed after death. The immortality of the soul was an integral and central part of the Christian myth and ideology, something which Pomponazzi could not accept and vehemently derided:

These things(concerning immortality) have been said so irrationally, they do not appear fitting for men devoting themselves to philosophy, but rather for poets, common men and even religious law makers, not concerned with

truth but with making men good and compliant... from fear of punishment  
[*Trattato sull'immortalita dell'anima*, in M.Pine, 1986:200].

Pomponazzi's blasphemous treatise *Trattato sull'immortalita dell'anima* (1516) was dedicated to the Venetian patrician Marcantorio Flavo Contarini, "his dearest friend", a one time student at the University of Padua in 1506, according to the modern Italian translator Vittoria P.Compagni [1999:3]. The treatise, aiming at denunciation of the central point and fundamental ideology, is also essentially an anti-Platonian discourse. Throughout his entire essay, Pomponazzi makes recourse to various works by Aristotle, using the as an instrument in his demolishing the essentially religious Platonic idea as the cause of the irrational belief. The running motif of Pomponazzi's essay is based on Aristotle's position articulated in his *De Anima*, that the intellectual operation takes place **inside** the human body, therefore, is organic, physical and material in form. He bases all his arguments on the general **organicist Aristotelian arguments**, on the organic nature of thought and psychic processes and posits them against the Platonian ideas or his immateriality.

Pomponazzi reiterated his concept of mortality in his *Defensorium* while defending his views and replying to his attacker and rival neo-Platonian Nifo [M.Pine, 1986: 201]. As a materialist and natural philosopher, Pomponazzi found the idea of immortality or traveling soul simply ridiculous. In his "battle for the soul," Pomponazzi simply enlightened the neo-Platonists and believers about the natural processes which included decay and death as a part of life and living organisms. Pomponazzi provoked the Church Fathers to engage in condemnation of his theories by having published his famed and notorious essay *De immortalite animae* and its sequel *Apologia* (1518). In 1517, Ambrosius Flandirus, suffragan Bishop of Mantua, publicly attacked Pomponazzi in a Latin Sermon, having noted that "a certain man, struck with senility and acting with delirious mind, wrote a worthless piece in which he asserted that souls are mortal" [ibid.,:124]. Pomponazzi tried to engage the Bishop into an open public debate but he underestimated the seriousness of the accusations and the power of the church at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Church correctly interpreted Pomponazzi's essay – his rejection of immortality of the soul was also the rejection of Resurrection of Christ since a mortal soul could not have transformed, and could not have been eternal. The Bishops, the friars of Venice, with Dominicans and Franciscans among them, were extremely good readers, masters of detecting the minute signs of anti-Christian thinking. They correctly interpreted Pomponazzi's often subtle text and read masterfully in between the lines. The diagnosis was blasphemy. His book was correctly identified as "a book against Faith" since to deny immortality meant to destroy the principal postulates of Christianity.

Pomponazzi lectured his students:

No philosopher can study religious laws for they are things of no consequence. A true, just philosopher cannot heed such things. Truth makes its own way; the philosopher knows the truth; the religious laws are false because they are not known per se or reduced to things known ["Prologue to Physics II" in M.Pine, 1986:117-18].

He openly charted the frontiers between philosophy and religion, as between Fact and Fiction. In his mind, philosophy was based on reality while religion on myth, just the same way as some pre-Socratics and Aristotle thought. For Pomponazzi, body and intellect are inseparable [1999:45]. “*L’Anima intellectiva, e materiale*”/ Soul is intellect and it is material in its nature, he wrote (1999:33). Soul needs body to start functioning, i.e. producing thoughts. “Soul is the function, the act of the body”, he claimed. Relying on Aristotle, Pomponazzi wrote, “*l’anima non-conosce mai senza un’immagine sensibile*”/Soul does not comprehend without the sensed images or without the senses produced by the body which nourishes the soul and activates cognition:

BODY – SOUL – SENSE – SOUL – COGNITION

Moreover, he also stated that “*esso no pensa senza imagine sensibilie*”/ no thought appears without the sensed or apprehended images” [1999:58]. Pomponazzi consistently argues, relying on the same text by Aristotle, maintaining that Organic Body is the locus of intellect, and, thus, is essentially material in its essence—“*L’anima e il luogo dell’forme, non tutta, ma l’intelletto*”/ soul is the locus of form, not all but for intellect [1999:65]. His argument about corporeality of Intellect and Thought is strictly Aristotelian, simultaneously debunking Plato, all scholastics and multiple Christian theologians. Pomponazzi revived during the High Renaissance all the material causes of Cosmos, articulated by Aristotle and his Academy, claiming the special place for Man in Cosmos, so contrary to the theological explanations and Christian dogmatics. His canonical treatise “On immortality of the Soul” was a defiant gesture against the entire Medieval scholasticism, having painstakingly adjusted Aristotle to their own dogmatism, the Biblical exegesis and religious mythology.

In this blasphemous treatise, Pomponazzi accomplished several goals – he denounced and destroyed the religious myth, the misuse and misinterpretation of Aristotle, debunked Plato and neo-Platonists, having placed Aristotle in the centre of the High Renaissance discourse on the eve of the birth of modern science, supporting Copernicus and antedating Kepler. Relying on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Pomponazzi argued that “the end of philosophy was to teach truth” while the purpose of theology was to disseminate falsehood. He argued

The philosopher’s desire to assert truth while many religions prohibit disputations and philosophers are not Christians: philosophers have been held in hatred: Socrates drank poison, Zeno was tortured, Aristotle went into exile [Pomponazzi’s “Commentary on the Prologue to the Physics III in M. Pine, 1986:119].

Enjoying the relatively free atmosphere in Italian society of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Pomponazzi naively hoped to win his debate on immortality, the purpose of philosophy vis-a-vis religion, and the triumph of materialism, natural philosophy over Platonism and neo-Platonism. His century would end with the tragic burning of

Giordano Bruno and the victory of the religious fanaticism. But the beginning or High Renaissance or Pomponazzi's day still seemed to be the most appropriate moment for Debate and proving the validity of Aristotelianism as "the most comprehensive view of nature" [ibid.:123]. But the Church continued to censor the discourse in society and stifle the imagination "by teaching immortality and offering it as a medicine to the masses" [ibid.] The immortality issue and controversy aroused by it took a lot of Pomponazzi's creative energy and time, but they were not as radical as his denunciation of miracles, paradise and hell which were a part of his *De incantationibus*, published only posthumously. In this truly radical treatise, Pomponazzi addressed the masses of believers, mocking their beliefs and admitting the efficacy of the religious indoctrination. In his view, the complexity of Cosmos could be the contributing factor to the proliferation of mythologies – all the dramatic changes of the heavenly bodies and the fall of kingdoms, new state formations could be found related in myth. Rather than seek other explanations, it is much easier to invent and rely on phantasy:

If we consider the marvelous and occult properties of nature, the power of the heavenly bodies, God, and the Intelligencies who care for man and the lower world, we will see that there is no need for demons or of other Intelligencies. For we will see that everything can be the work of the cited forces [in ibid.: 198, from *De incantationibus*].

Given the miraculous presence and natural processes in Cosmos, Pomponazzi thought that one cannot be surprised at human myth of the Marvelous and attribution of the cosmic processes to the unknown forces. It is easy for the simplistic Religious myth to invade human imagination, it may hide behind the wondrous images of Cosmos. The picture is so marvelous that it is very hard to explain its origins, the causes of Wonder while it is much easier to accept, believe and rely on Myth, the power of the fantastic.

Much like Aristotle, Pomponazzi did not believe into the intellectual equality of all men and left the intellectual pursuits to a minority of truth seekers, reconciling with the fact that masses are satisfied with primitive myth and that the majority of humanity are either unwilling, or incapable to exercise their own mind and be rational. And that is why the myth makers could be so successful and "proclaim openly the truth and solidity of the Christian religion and do it so efficaciously" [ibid.:257]. Pomponazzi argues that miracles "do violate the order of Created Nature" but regrettably religion is more successful in convincing the masses than philosophers. The truth seekers, the philosophers and the best of them, even Aristotle, in his view had been unable to deliver their arguments to the believers and sway their belief. It was much easier to adopt the myth than to try to understand the contra-arguments of the learned atheists. Pomponazzi clearly tries to deliver his doctrine of the truth seekers and that of Aristotle during the High Renaissance, hoping to succeed in changing the indoctrinated minds. His numerous commentaries on Aristotle evidence that. He made an attempt to perfect the efficacy of the Aristotelian teaching and to create his own doctrine in the process.

## 6. Pomponazzi, an Aristotelian, *Contra Aristotle*

A materialist secular thinker and natural philosopher and dedicated neo-Aristotelian of the Renaissance, Pomponazzi still felt, in his day, compelled to say something new and push Aristotelianism towards the new heights. Not being a blind follower and driven by the impulse to renovate and update Aristotle, Pomponazzi paid attention to what appeared to him as inconsistencies in the thought of the Stagerite:

He says. At times that it [soul] is material and mixed or not separable, while, at other times that it is immaterial and separable. For in definition of the soul, it is held the act of the physical body; but at times he says that it is not the act of any body. These state-ments seem to be contradictory. Wherefore interpreters have taken this in different ways, and some have thought that Aristotle did not understand himself... [Ibid.:76].

Without quoting Aristotle, Pomponazzi makes claims about inconsistencies. The ambitious Mantovan wants to pass his critique of the Stagerite and somewhat demote his status, but he fails to accomplish that without the textual proof, the arguments are just opinions. Aristotle is so abundantly and profoundly clear in his definitions that nobody could ever demolish his arguments through the millennia of commentaries. In fact, the lucidity of Aristotle's thought remains unchallenged, towering over two millennia of daring commentators. In his work *On the Soul/De Anima*, he states:

The soul is inseparable from the body [1984, vol.I:657];

The soul cannot be without the body [ibid.:659];

The knowledge of the soul admittedly contributes greatly to the advance of truth [ibid.: 641];

The soul, it is said is in movement [ibid.:648];

The soul is a kind of harmony [ibid.:650];

The soul may perceive and come to know everything [ibid.: 653];

The soul is the power to know [ibid.].

If Pomponazzi, for the sake of the debates with the Church and “battle for the soul” is fixated on mortality of the body and soul, Aristotle's soul is not simply part of the material body, but it is also **a natural sign** of multiple meanings, unraveling the inner universal world of thinking man. It is comprehensive, pointing out to the materiality of the body and partly corporeal essence of the soul, the producer of Culture and *sopra* layer over Nature. Aristotle's soul is not merely a proof of biological origins, but also **an instrument of cognition**, “power to know,” a constructive device for creation of civilization, a psychological factor in attitudes and relationships of Man and Nature, and of Man to Man.

Pomponazzi attempted to create his own doctrine of the soul in the context of the strict religious censorship. But first, he had to demolish the central tenet of Christianity with the help of Aristotle's natural philosophy and general teaching. Unfortunately, his project was not completed, being stopped by the Church right in the middle. Second, Pomponazzi had to convince that “Aristotle was a man and could

err” [“Lecture in 1500, in M.Pine, 1986:96]. In the process, he even dared to repeat some ridiculous commentaries on Aristotle such as “Aristotle’s Doctrine on intellective soul was highly chimerical and bestial” [ibid.]. In Pomponazzi’s philosophy, man is not in the centre of the universe, but a part of Nature, subject to birth, growth, decay and eventual death which he can never escape [ibid.,:157]. In his battle with the tyrannical monotheism and Catholic Church, Pomponazzi armed himself with the single Aristotelian postulate – the biological imperative of human condition, without elevating Reason and human intellect. Fighting the Church, he needed to prove the mortality of man as a biological creature, a part of Cosmos and denounce the afterlife, resurrection and condemn miracles promoted by all three Abrahamic religions.

### 7. Pomponazzi Using Aristotle for His Fight with the Church

The Mantuan anticipates Le Bon’s treatise *The Crowd* by several centuries and argues that the gullible and ignorant crowd needs fictions, mythological primitive explanations of reality. Pomponazzi called theologians “holy doctors” who treat the masses with their tales. Trying to demolish the religious doctrine, Pomponazzi even resorts to Plato:

Plato taught the existence of angels and demons not because he believed in them but because it was his aim to instruct the ignorant [*De incantationibus*, ibid: 264].

Having taken the pathway of dissuading the ignorant and gullible, Pomponazzi often directed his arguments against Aristotle, making them rather unconvincing and vague. Trying to assert himself as a producer of the new paradigm, Pomponazzi extracted from Aristotle’s classical text on the Soul solely the concept of mortality in order to carry out his battle against the Church. He left only the organic essence of the soul, its death. Despite his alleged fidelity to Aristotle, Pomponazzi simply adjusted the biological imperative of his teaching to his own anti-clerical battle, having ignored the active intellect, central to Aristotle. Fearful of losing the “battle for the soul,” Pomponazzi peels off only the surface from the Aristotelian polysemantic and polyvalent universe of the psyche/*anima*/soul, fixating solely on mortality and physicality of the body and its part, the soul. Consequently, his fidelity to Aristotle is only partial and selective. He concentrates on the material frame of the intellect and cognition as a process which is the result of the body’s material, natural functioning. He writes to this effect:

But although the human intellect, as has been considered, does not use quantity in knowing, nevertheless, since it is joined to a sense, it cannot be released entirely from the matter and quantity, since it never knows without a phantasm, as Aristotle says in *De Anima*, III. “The soul does not know at all without a phantasm” Hence, it thus needs the body as object [*Tractatus de immortalitate animae* in ibid, ibid: 65].

Pomponazzi who knew no Greek relied on the translations into Latin and memory of others. Aristotle does talk in *De anima*, Book III, about the corporeality and natural origin of fantasy. In Aristotle's view, the name fantasy/*fantasia* has been formed from *faos*, meaning "light" [1984, vol.I:682]. He asserts that the perceived and imagined objects have the original material or natural origins. His primary cause is in the organic or natural body. Pomponazzi argues that Intellect cannot be measured and that quantity of knowledge cannot be determined but it is still related to a sense:

BODY      SENSE      INTELLECT  
FANTASY

The released image of the world, in this system, is first sensed, perceived, processed and then becomes the part of the shared communal property of all other thinking bodies, but without completely leaving the body which had produced it to begin with. All Pomponazzi's arguments pursue the ultimate goal of denouncing the Christian dogma, the myth of resurrection and immortality of the soul. Pomponazzi, a philosopher-heretic, appeals to the minds of his students, colleagues, and the rest of society in order to reject what seemed and appeared to be preposterous, while using his innate wit:

Everything which is affirmed by canonical Scripture and deduced universally by the Holy Catholic Church, it is necessary to hold completely as established and necessary without the least hesitation. On the contrary, everything she condemns we must reject. [Pomponazzi, *De incantationibus*, in *ibid*, *ibid*: 318]

The myth of the Christians, their dogma was a fact, the reality of the 16<sup>th</sup> century life, as well as the role of the Catholic Church. It was a given existential framework but a rational intellect had to reject all the Church commandments, starting from the resurrection and immortality, challenging the three major manipulators and "the greatest tricksters such as Moses, Christ and Muhammad" [A.Gorfinkel, 1977: 123]. As an heir to the Romans, Pomponazzi accepted the existence of the Church side by side with the universities, or the religious myth next to logical reasoning. But he wanted the masses to reject all that church condemned – paganism, mortality of man, decay of nature and body, materialism and the material causes of cosmos. Pomponazzi, an Aristotelian and follower of Lucretius, rejected God as the creator of Cosmos, the divine intervention in the life of all species, including Man. He mocked miracles and devils created by the Hebrew-Christian imagination, but he could do it only in the works published posthumously, left for posterity, his intellectual soul, paradoxically, remaining long after his death. But Pomponazzi's entire life campaign against irrationality of resurrection and religious mythology was not limited to the late writings. In 1522, Pomponazzi, lecturing on *De generatione et corruptione* by Aristotle, dared to utter publicly and firmly, "if the soul is mortal, according to the philosopher, we can never hope to resurrected" [M.Pine, 1986:351]. The Christian

myth was nothing but a fable, imagined to offer the impossible to the living and Pomponazzi, an atheist and natural philosopher, the Renaissance neo-Aristotelian, was interested only in the real and proven, or in Truth alone.

## Conclusions

Pomponazzi's academic career reflects the specific cultural climate of the pre-Inquisition Italy, when Christianity, paganism, atheism and natural philosophy could exist side by side. Despite his blasphemous writings and public statements, Pomponazzi survived the attacks and public denunciation. He was fortunate to die before 1542 when the Inquisition Tribunal was instituted. Had he died later, his predicament would have been the same as that of Giordano Bruno. He went down into history as a 16<sup>th</sup>-century neo-Aristotelian, who symbolizes the vitality and continuum of Aristotelianism in the era of advanced science. Pomponazzi promoted the organic theory of cognition and that "soul depended on the organ of its operation" as well as natural philosophical postulates in the age of evolving biology, physics, astronomy and medicine. His exegesis of Aristotle did not result in a new doctrine, as he intended, nor did he manage to advance Aristotle's multidisciplinary teaching, but Pomponazzi continued his battle for Reason and freedom of human soul against Faith and blind Belief. This battle placed Pomponazzi into the long row of intellectual revolutionaries and martyrs for Truth. Descartes, Bacon, Locke, Spinoza, Kant and Leibnitz have their precursors in Pomponazzi, Telesio, Bruno, Vanini, Campanella and Cesalpino who had proved that Italian Renaissance was not only a parade of Art and high aestheticism, but also the most intense intellectual re-assessment of the past for the benefits of the future.

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**Note.** English quotations from Pomponazzi's Latin *Trattatus de immortalitate animae* are taken from Martin Pine's 1986-monograph; English translations from the 1999 – Italian translation of the same Pomponazzi's text were done by the author.