

The Making of Theology

Scholasticism. Humanism. Realism. Nominalism. All of these terms describe a movement that could be summed up as "The Quest to Know." This was the predominate theme of the *medium aevum* or Middle Age. The incessant desire to work out one's theology in light of philosophy or one's philosophy in light of theology resulted in a surge of intellectual debate and struggle. Which discipline was driving which was the ultimate quest for theologians and philosophers in this period. Is faith purely rational or is it simply some kind of mystical reflection upon revelation? Could it be that faith is a mixture of reason and reflection? Where does one start — with reason or with revelation? What is the relationship between religion and knowledge? These are just a sample of questions that were asked between scholasticism and humanism, the two primary schools of Christian thought in the Middle Ages.

In response to the classical philosophy of the Greeks and many early Christian writers, the scholastic movement was an attempt to systematize every aspect of faith using the mechanics of logic and reason. Scholasticism asserted the right and duty of reason to scrutinize all revealed truths. In order to understand a revealed truth, one must analyze its premises and answer any objections which may be raised against it. In an attempt to explicate the universe, two schools of thought emerged: realism and nominalism. Although these paradigms of reality do not exclusively belong to the scholastic movement and do somewhat overlap into the area of humanism, chronologically they fall into the scholastic period between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-1274) would be considered a moderate realist. A nominalist's position can be seen in William of Ockham (ca. 1280-1349).

The dividing line between realism and nominalism centers on the question of universals. What is the relationship between abstract and general concepts in the mind and the particulars of the concept? Does the term *man* refer to any reality apart from particular men such as the Apostle Paul? This is the question of universals and has subtle but far-reaching implications upon theology and philosophy.

It was the view of Aquinas that sensing or experiencing a particular man, such as the Apostle Paul, is actually sensing or experiencing the universal essence of man. In other words, "the intellect *sees* the universal *in* the particular thing; it *abstracts* the universal from the particular thing" (*From Socrates to Sarte*, p. 188).

Universals have a metaphysical existence in the mind of God but do not exist apart from God (contra Plato's Theory of Forms). So for Aquinas, certainty of knowing comes from an experience of the object known. Nothing could be in the mind without first being experienced through the senses. Hence, reliable knowledge about reality beyond the empirical, concrete world is based solely upon experience.

William of Ockham, on the other hand, had a different view of reality. Together with Aquinas, William maintained that universals are found in particular things and are known only after an experience of those particulars. However, he did not assign to universals a status of metaphysical existence in the mind of God. As a nominalist, William maintained that universal terms such as *man* are only names or convenient categories used to explain the world in an orderly fashion. Even though the mind uses universal terminology and is able to experience individual things it is not capable of knowing with certainty anything beyond the particulars. As far as the mind and human reason goes, there is no reality above and beyond the concrete world. Therefore, the only way to know of God's existence, for example, is to accept it by faith and not discover it by reason.

William's nominalism did a great deal to disassemble the synthesis between faith and reason that Aquinas had sought to construct. It separated metaphysics not only from the scientific world but from the world of philosophy as well. It implied that there are two systems of truth – one kind discovered through science and philosophy and another revealed through revelation. The former was based upon experience of the empirical world, while the later was to be accepted by faith and on the basis of the authority of that revelation. While Aquinas maintained that faith and reason go hand in hand, William of Ockham placed the two disciplines worlds apart. The world of faith could not influence the world of reason and *vis-à-vis*.

One of the potential dangers of William's nominalism in denying the existence of universals falls in the ethical arena. If there is no universal ideal of goodness or justice and these ideals are only to be found in a particular instance or circumstance then is goodness and justice relative to that instance? For the Christian, what is good or just is to be found in the nature of God who is the sum total of goodness and justice. Hence, one can and should espouse that what is right (or wrong) for one individual is universally right or wrong for all (notwithstanding cultural particulars which are amoral in nature, e.g. alcoholic beverages).

But in all fairness to William, Aquinas' realism breaks down under ethical scrutiny as well. In essential agreement with Aristotle, Thomas believed that man achieves his end when the appetitive lusts and desires are controlled by the will and reason. Upon being enlightened by God, man's chief end becomes supernatural in that he pursues pleasure and happiness in living for God. The difficulty is that the appetitive nature — enlightened though it is as a Christian— must still be subservient to the will and reason. The problem is that an act can appear *reasonably* right when, in listening to God, the enlightened one hears a different story. In other words, could it not be necessary at times to turn down the volume of reason in order to hear the voice of God? The danger in Thomastic ethics could be that morality becomes too mechanical as right and wrong are turned into a matter of intellectual gymnastics. While William's nominalism potentially destroys a universal morality, Thomas' realism could exalt reason over revelation.

All this talk of the existence of universals in the scholastic movement became quite unsatisfying. As the Middle Ages merged into the Renaissance period philosophers and theologians began to seek out new ways of understanding the world. The rigors of logic and reason could not satisfy the quest to know. This unrest led to the humanists movement which was an important precursor to the Reformation period. This movement was a revival in learning classical literature and language. The fourteenth century humanists saw value not only in studying Greek literature but sought to apply the principles of that literature to life.

Francesco Petrarch (c. 1304-74) moved decisively away from scholasticism and into the heart of what came to be known as humanism. Unsatisfied with systematic elucidations of Christianity that scholasticism developed, he began placing stress on conscience and faith. Petrarch saw a significant difference between trust in God and an intellectual understanding of God (Pr 3:5-6). As he read Augustine and Scripture, Petrarch found that self-analysis, despair, moral ambiguities and trust in the grace of Christ were all indicative of his own life as they had been for Augustine. In reading through Augustine's *Confessions* he recognized a genuine affinity between himself and Augustine. Reflecting upon the conversion of Augustine, Petrarch claims a similar experience with the grace of God as he agonized over his own human insignificance before a merciful God. Exposure to other Patristic Fathers, such as Jerome, Ambrosia, Gregory the Great, Augustine and Chrysostom Petrarch was led to devote himself to the study of Scripture.

Truth for Aquinas and scholasticism was a metaphysical entity to be intellectually analyzed. It could be reduced into a systematic, objective and

coherent area of study. Faith was a series of propositions that could be neatly ordered and adhered to. With Petrarch and humanism as a whole, truth was a personal conviction, a psychological certainty regarding rightness and reality. What he saw in Augustine was a love not of reason but of virtue and honor. It was these moral, psychological and spiritual dimensions of faith which drew Petrarch further away from the scholastic movement and into the arena of humanism.

Rhetoric was also a hallmark of humanism. The active force in shaping men's lives and provoking moral reform can only come through the art of rhetoric. The ". . . eloquence of truth would lie mute and never relate to the reality of human affairs" (*Humanism and the Church Fathers* p. 58) without a herald of that truth. In the eve of Renaissance society humanism rekindled interest in rhetoric and eloquent speech as it sought to communicate the principles of classical literature.

The excessive rationalism of the scholastic movement led Erasmus, the great humanist from Holland, to fervently learn the Koine Greek of the New Testament and uncover the simple teachings of Scripture. He published a Greek New Testament that became widely accepted and also a new Latin translation. Erasmus was extremely critical of the monastic movement and its petty concerns with the details of discipline and matters of dress. He also criticized the papacy in their hair-splitting dogmas and felt that religion was not to be from the head but from the heart. He sought to balance a simplified Christianity with classical Greek thought. His optimism in humanity for the potential of moral development led Luther to vehemently oppose him in support of the total corruption of the human nature. In spite of this opposition, Erasmus continued to believe that education in the classics could eventually lead man down the path of enlightenment and away from ignorance and stupidity.

The dangers of humanism in the Renaissance period are the same as they are today. One can believe in the potentiality of humankind so much so that the reality of humanity's true condition and need is lost. If education and literary enlightenment were really the answer then how does one explain the same old moral dilemmas that still plague the world today in this age of information? Granted the western world today is far less "enlightened" in classical literature than perhaps it should be (see especially Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*.) However, the point is that it is a great distance between potentiality and actuality. Also, the idea that education can make all the difference in the moral development of mankind is equally erroneous. This is not to say that it can make no difference. But, Scripture says that one can know the right thing to do and still not do it (Jm. 4:17).

Contrary to Plato and Erasmus knowledge is not power. Knowledge is simply knowledge. How one uses knowledge is going to, to some extent, depend upon the moral capacity of the individual. If that moral capacity is stained by sin then all the knowledge and education in the world cannot guarantee anything beyond a larger database. Nevertheless, Paul also said that through the Law comes knowledge of sin (taking the term Law to be both Mosaic law and the law of conscience from Romans 2 and 3). In other words, knowledge of wrong and right does function as the basis for accountability before God. So humanistic thought, in regard to the potentiality of humankind, must be balanced with the realistic thought of the reality of humankind's moral condition.

There seems to be a thick line drawn between humanism and scholasticism in the Middle Ages. On one side is faith; the other side is reason. Humanism brought in the subjective elements of faith, trust and conscience while scholasticism emphasized reason. The two facets of faith and reason were thought to be harmonized by Aquinas until William of Ockham entered the scene. What is impossible with reason becomes attainable with faith. As the Renaissance moved into the Reformation, this axiom became a distinguishing mark of reformed thought.

How the two areas of faith and reason come together is essential to a proper worldview. While there are epistemological differences between how one acquires knowledge of God and knowledge of the world, there can be no doubt that the content of faith includes knowledge. Christianity (or any religion for that matter) does not exist in a vacuum; it is *descriptive* in nature. In order to explicate Christianity one must integrate propositions which are cognitive (e.g., "God exists"). How we come to accept as true (i.e., corresponding to reality) these propositions are a matter of both faith and reason. Christianity must be translated into meaningful language that accurately describes and communicates the essentials. That polemical process must, of necessity, be rational. The scholastic movement is very valuable in this way and should not be abandoned.

However, some things will remain incomprehensible in the realm of religion. This was the focus of humanism in the Middle Ages. How it is that tragedy fits into the perfect and sovereign plan of God remains a mystery. Why it is that only some were chosen to eternal salvation is equally perplexing. A quiet confidence in the merciful and loving God is all that remains during times of confusion. The fact that one cannot understand the mechanics of God's purposes for his creation does not preclude the possibility of trusting him. As with Pascal one must rest in the truth that "everything which is incomprehensible does not cease to exist." In other words, simply because one does not realize the complexities of God's

sovereignty does not make them go away! The Christian is sometimes left with nothing more than a silent dependence on God. To this extent humanism contributed a great deal to the Christian faith.

How one discovers and explicates God and his universe remains essential in the quest to know. Theology and philosophy are both essential in this quest. An emphasis upon either discipline at the expense of having one undergird the other did indeed drive a wedge between the two schools of scholasticism and humanism. These two movements did much in illustrating both the objective/rational side and subjective/non-rational side of Christianity. Taken together, both approaches made invaluable contributions to medieval and renaissance Christianity and both were a necessary precursor to the Reformation.

—References—

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