

Lecture 2: Challenges to Aquinas' Synthesis

Week Six, Part 2

Before proceeding with this segment of Week 6, you will need to read one entry on each of the following three figures: *Bonaventure*, *John Duns Scotus*, and *William of Ockham*. Our course textbooks need supplementing on these figures, which is why I am asking you to read the entries. Your posts in the discussion will need to reference the site you've used. You may select the entries from the following sites:

Sites on Bonaventure

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy - Saint Bonaventure
- Catholic Information Network (CIN) - St. Bonaventure
- Encyclopedia Britannica - Saint Bonaventure

Sites on John Duns Scotus

- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy - John Duns Scotus
- John Duns Scotus

Sites on William of Ockham

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy - William of Ockham
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy - William of Ockham

6.2 The Franciscan Reaction to Aquinas

Great minds and great ideas induce other great minds to respond, often, in critique. Already in Thomas Aquinas' own time equally brilliant rejoinders were offered to the 'new philosophy' (the 13th century name for Thomas' Christian reception and interpretation of Aristotle). Unsurprisingly, the major respondents to the Dominican Thomists were Franciscans, the mendicant order begun by St. Francis of Assisi. It is a permanently fascinating feature of medieval theology and church history that two orders with so parallel a vision of the Christian life could have so quickly entered into a significant theological and philosophical dispute that would eventually and permanently alter the theological landscape of the West. The fact that both orders were officially sanctioned by the Church, and that both were committed fully to the Catholic faith ought to correct some of the misinformed views one often hears about the rigid uniformity of the Medieval Church. The Church could indeed tolerate diversity of thought, as long as the diversity was centered on shared core beliefs, sacramental practices, and wider ecclesial loyalties. What the church could not tolerate was doctrinal *pluralism*, which is substantively a quite different phenomenon from philosophical and hermeneutical *diversity*. Diversity refers to different interpretations of a shared center; 'pluralism' refers to different 'centers.'

The source of the immediate reaction to Thomas originated in the different philosophical canopy of the Franciscan way of life. Franciscan theology and piety

was grounded in the Augustinian-Neoplatonic tradition, which held that real knowledge comes not from sense perception but from the inner illumination of the intellect by faith, and that the focus of the Christian life is ascent of the mind and soul to God, through the agency of Jesus' crucified humanity. The use of analytical Aristotelian philosophy seemed to Franciscan thinkers to lead in exactly the wrong direction: not towards the reunion of the soul with God, but towards a academic sterility that trusted more in human wisdom than in Divine Wisdom, which was to be found only in Christ Incarnate and Crucified. All of this is classically expressed in the thirteenth century theologian, philosopher, and mystic who was every bit Thomas Aquinas' intellectual and spiritual equal, Saint Bonaventure (1217-1274).

6.2.1 Bonaventure: Faith 'over' Reason

Along with the short selection from Bonaventure in Anderson and the website you chose, you will read more about Bonaventure's theology in the PowerPoint that follows this lecture. Here I will say that Bonaventure's theology is simultaneously rational, biblical, and mystical. Its superstructure and flow are dictated by the classic threefold movement of Neoplatonic Christianity. The words Bonaventure uses for this movements are: "emanation, exemplarity, and consummation." Ilia Delio reinterprets these three movements for modern readers of Bonaventure as three questions: 1) Where have we come from? 2) What are we doing here? and 3) Where are we going?" (*Simply Bonaventure*, p. 12). Human beings are on a journey back to God, and to know this truth is to know the single most important thing that we need to know as human beings created in the Image of God. In the spirit of the Augustinian tradition, our single most important task as human beings created in the Image of God is to open our 'restless heart' (Augustine's *cor inquietum*) to the healing journey which results ultimately, eschatologically in the soul's contemplative rest in God.

Bonaventure's threefold movement is mirrored in the mystics' s journey of purgation, illumination, and perfection, which you learned about in the section on Mysticism. Bonaventure's theology is Trinitarian and Christocentric, Christ being the One whom the soul follows in its return to God (s.v., "Bonaventure," *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*). Bonaventure is deeply stamped by the Augustinian/Franciscan tradition, and offers a theological vision of life in the world that is a grand, comprehensive, systematic counterpoint to the Thomistic vision of a synthesis of faith and reason. For Bonaventure the point and goal of theology is finally only one thing: union with God. If the use of 'secular' philosophy to clarify the Christian message in any way endangers theology's true goal, then it is a problematic method, and must therefore be used with extreme caution, and perhaps to maybe even avoided. Bonaventure is not anti-rational, or even anti-philosophical. Rather, he holds that all that humans do and seek must be directed toward the single end for which human beings exist: to know God.

So is the most important task of the human person to find the soul's home in God, or is it both the find that home and to understand the world of which we are a part? These are --somewhat simplified-- two different visions of the Christian life: the first, the Bonaventurian-Franciscan vision, the second the Thomistic-Dominican

vision. Interestingly one sees vestiges of these two visions yet today in different views of the Christian life.

6.2.3 Duns Scotus (1265? – 1308) & William of Ockham (ca. 1280-1349): Nominalism vs. Realism

John Duns Scotus was possessed of an incredible intellect, so much that he has since the High Middle Ages been titled '*Doctor Subtilis*' –the Subtle Doctor. His written works fill 26 volumes, most of which has never been translated from Latin. He stood in the shadow of the towering figures of Thomas and Bonaventure, though he was their intellectual equal. Like Aquinas, he wrote a commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, though Scotus took a quite different approach. His belief that reason alone can know only God as first cause, but that all other doctrines and claims of the church must be taken strictly on faith was in many ways at odds with Thomas's understanding of the mutual though differing roles of reason and faith. Scotus' view that God must be understood primarily in terms of the Will, not of Intellect, turns into an idea that, like an acid begins to eat away at the high estimation of rationality that Scholastic theology held. None of this means that Duns Scotus was 'irrational'; he was capable of precise and exacting lines of argument. But the project of Scholastic Theology believed that reason could be used to verify all the church's faith claims, and Scotus cast deep doubt on this assumption.

In his objection to this scholastic assumption, Duns Scotus shows himself to be thoroughly rooted in the Franciscan tradition. The problem that Scotus' thought creates (and the thought of Ockham and other nominalists afterwards) is that the picture of the world and God's relation to it they paint appears increasingly arbitrary. Theirs is not a harmonious world in which God as the rational ground of all being, so to speak, plays by the rules. Rather, in Duns Scotus' theology God relates to the world strictly by God's own unfathomable will; what God does is right because God does it (rather than as a Thomist would say, the world and God's relation to it run fittingly by God's justice, God acting in accord with God's own rules of 'rightness'). Scotus and the Nominalist philosophers and theologians essentially unravel the Scholastic synthesis in order to preserve God's omnipotence and freedom, but in so doing they succeeded in creating a vision of the world in which the average Christian could no longer be sure of how God will relate to him or her; even if Christians follow the rules –living within the sacramental of the church, for example. Scotus' God would do what Scotus' God would do, and whatever that was, was right, even if it seemed unjust by the best human standards. It took a while for all this to unfold (or unravel!), and it was probably not Scotus' plan; he was arguing against the threat of Aristotelian rationalism and empiricism which might obscure his deep Franciscan faith in following Jesus. But sometimes in the history of theology, one generation's remedy to a theological problem, becomes a subsequent generation's stumbling block.

William of Ockham took themes that Duns Scotus developed and pushed them even further. Ockham was, like Scotus, a brilliant intellect and logician. He received the title *Doctor Invincibilis*: the Unconquerable Doctor. In his work we see expressed with great clarity the principles of a movement philosophers call

Nominalism. Ockham rejected belief in the existence of universals or eternal ideas in the mind of God, by which God governs the world, because this belief, in his estimation, limited God's freedom; he further rejected the claim that God's existence and attributes could be proved apart from revelation. "In short, he destroyed the conception of the relationship between theology and philosophy elaborated in the 13th century" (*ODCC*, 2d ed., p. 1484).

Ockham articulated ideas that become the building blocks of the modern Western world. He defended the idea of the independence of the state from the church, rejected the idea that there was a universal and immutable order, viewed God in terms of absolute power and will (not in terms of being), and saw Scripture alone as ultimately authoritative. He critiqued the pope and the church, which led to his spending the latter part of his life in exile in Germany. Interestingly, 150 years after Ockham's death, his philosophical stance, called 'Nominalism,' was taught in the universities of Germany, e.g., by Gabriel Biel (1420-1495), and these ideas helped form an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther.

The legacy of Ockham is remarkable, in the sense that much that moderns and postmoderns take for granted about life, politics, and the nature of the world was first articulated by him. Positively speaking, modern democratic states and autonomous individuals who seek their own well being and create their own futures are not imaginable apart from Ockham and Nominalism. Our early medieval ancestors saw the world and their place in it as permanently reflecting the divine mind and order. They would not recognize our social and political world at all because Nominalism began to deconstruct all this. But even if Nominalism sparked a new revolution in the West, one that will have far ranging consequences centuries after Scotus and Ockham, it is unlikely that these thinkers could see the far-reaching consequences of their own thought.

I might add here that Nominalist thought, in my view, helped contribute to the increasing inability of Western people to imagine God as Trinity. Nominalists turned from analogical language to more univocal linguistic ideas, and once one has a hard time conceptualizing 'essences' as having an independent reality from the things which embody these universals, it becomes harder to imagine 'one substance in three hypostases.' It also become harder to imagine the church as a universal body that is the prior ground of the less than perfect historical expressions of the Church. I also hear even in modern fundamentalism echoes of the late medieval belief that God should be understood as absolute power, scripture as absolute authority, and the Christian life as being about unbending obedience to 'absolute truth.' All of this looked quite different in Ockham's late Medieval Catholic context, but once there was a fracturing of Christendom in the Reformation, and then subsequent atomization of Christianity into highly individualized denominations, the type of absolutism Ockham discussed took on a more complex and difficult character. I should also add that in the post-Modern world I would not trade Ockham's political vision for anything, only that some of his ideas had far-ranging consequences of a less positive sort that he could not foresee. And this, I hasten to add, is true of all of us.

6.2.4 The Breakdown of the Medieval/Scholastic Synthesis of Faith and Reason

The scholastic synthesis of faith and reason was an unparalleled event in the history of the West. The Western world has never seen another attempt that so comprehensively sought to address all the questions of human existence within the framework of the Christian Faith and the Church's life. But from Scholasticism's own flowering were born the seeds of its transformation. The later Middle Ages, that period from roughly 1300-1500, will be a time in which academic theology becomes more removed from the lives and struggles of the average Christian, a time when church and society will face one upheaval after another, and when corruption within the church will spark various renewal movements, some of which portend a coming great disruption begun when an Augustinian monk (named Martin Luther) struggled to find a reliably merciful God in an spiritual universe that had become unpredictable and hostile.

Yet neither the theologies of Thomas nor Bonaventure will ever be abandoned, but will continue to be studied and lived in successive generations. In a sense they represent two types of Christian theology, analogous to the two types of theology we examined in the 2nd-3rd centuries: theologies which creatively engage contemporary culture and philosophy, and theologies which faithfully re-engage the Jesus Story and search for all their signposts there. Both types have biblical warrants, so one cannot claim that one type is the 'one, true, Christian theology.' Both come with benefits and perils: a Bonaventurian theology stays rooted in the Jesus story and reads reality from that lens, but can tend towards absolutism and obscurantism. A Thomistic theology makes ample space for both rational, scientific thought and for faith in revelation, but can tend towards intellectualism, rationalism, and hair-splitting analysis remote from the struggles of people's lives.

In theology, there is no storm-free zone. We follow a path and stay generous towards others on different paths. If all the paths lead us to the love of God, neighbor, and enemy, then we can't go too far wrong.