

Talk for “Redemption of Reason” Conference (Nov. 4, 2005)

The Roman Catholic Experience in American Higher Education

by
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Before starting on the substance, a few words about what I understand my role here to be. First, I want to emphasize that I am not a philosopher. Hence, I am not competent to deal with the redeeming of reason as a speculative issue. All I can do is offer a descriptive account of the historical experience of American Catholics in this area in the hope that it will shed some light on the concerns of Evangelical Christians.¹ For two generations of Catholic educators believed they had successfully “redeemed reason” by adopting Neoscholastic philosophy as their school philosophy.

My presentation will have two parts. First, I will trace the role played by Neoscholasticism (also known as Scholasticism, Thomism, or Neo-Thomism) in Catholic higher education. This will occupy most of my time. After that, I will make a few brief remarks on how all this may be relevant to the project of redeeming reason as it presents itself to Evangelicals

How Neoscholasticism Came to Dominate Catholic Higher Education

¹ Fuller development of, and documentation for, the points made in this paper may be found in two of my books, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), esp. chap. 5, and pp. 297-304; and *Keeping the Faith: American Catholicism Past and Present* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1987), esp. chaps 1, 7, and 8; and in my article, “Neoscholasticism as Preconciliar Ideology,” *U. S. Catholic Historian*, 7 (Fall, 1988): 401-411.

The great revival of Scholastic philosophy, which began in the middle decades of the 19th century, received its decisive impetus from Pope Leo XIII's 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. This document exhorted Catholics to return to "the golden wisdom of St. Thomas [Aquinas]." Leo stressed the *philosophy* of St. Thomas because most of the evils of the modern world, social and political as well as religious, could be traced back to the misuse of human reason. The Thomistic version of Aristotelianism could not only aid in overcoming these evils, it also furnished a stepping stone to faith by demonstrating that "God *is*," and at the same time lent to theology "the nature, form, and genus of a true science" by providing the speculative principles whereby the data of revelation could be organized and grasped as a synthetic whole.

This papal initiative was a key turning point, but Scholastic philosophy did not immediately become the curricular centerpiece in Catholic colleges. The primary reason was that the colleges were not yet organized in such a way as to make that possible. They were still predominately secondary-level schools, theoretically committed to the classical languages as the basic content of real education. Indeed, Catholic educators were so completely absorbed by critical organizational and curricular challenges between the 1890s and the 1920s that they had little time for philosophy.

The fundamental problem was that the old-time Catholic college – like the German *Gymnasium* or the French *lycee* – combined secondary studies and the lower level of collegiate work in a continuous six- or seven-year program. This arrangement did not mesh at all with the American system which separated these two levels of education into two distinct four-year institutions. The anomaly had existed from the beginning, but with the multiplication of free public high schools in the late 19th century, along with massive increases in overall college enrollments and the proliferation of "new subjects" (novelties like English and history!),

Catholic colleges could no longer straddle what had become a sharp institutional divide between secondary and collegiate education.

The ensuing crisis presented them with three choices – become what reformers called a “standard” college; drop down to high school level, or go out of business altogether. How they dealt with the crisis is a fascinating story, which we cannot go into here. All we can do is note that the process required roughly two decades and resulted in the “modernization” of Catholic colleges. That meant, among other things, eliminating secondary-level students, accepting the credit-hour system, the elective principle, majors and minors, specialization of learning embodied in academic departments, and a great variety of vocational courses – the latter often being associated with a college’s upgrading itself to “university” status by adding professional programs in law, medicine, pharmacy, journalism, and so on.

By the time they completed this process in the 1920s, they were ready to incorporate Neoscholasticism. Several factors made that development especially timely.

First – and most important – papal policy in respect to the revival of Scholasticism had shifted from exhortation to rigorous enforcement. This dated from Pope Pius X’s condemnation in 1907 of the theological deviation known as “Modernism.” In anathematizing this “synthesis of all heresies,” as he called it, the Pope observed that it sprang from “the union between faith and false philosophy.” Contemptuous of Scholasticism, the Modernists had embraced modern philosophy “with all its false glamour” and thereby placed the faith in grave jeopardy. Their ideas were vehemently proscribed and, to make sure nothing of the kind ever happened again, Pius “strictly ordain[ed] that scholastic philosophy be made the basis of the sacred sciences.” To remove any lingering ambiguity, he added: “And let it be clearly understood ... that when We prescribe scholastic philosophy We understand chiefly that which the Angelic Doctor [St.

Thomas] has bequeathed to us...” All the ordinances of Leo XIII on this matter were reaffirmed and were to be strictly observed in all Catholic seminaries. For, Pius went on to say, professors of philosophy and theology courted grave peril “if they deviated so much as a step ... from Aquinas.”

This emphatic requirement was formalized in the Code of Canon Law (promulgated in 1917) which specified that professors of the sacred sciences were to “adhere religiously” to “the method, the doctrine, and the principles” of St. Thomas. In addition, the then reigning pope, Benedict XV, stated that “the Church has proclaimed that the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas is her own.” In 1923, his successor, Pope Pius XI, elaborated the point and enumerated the relevance of St. Thomas’s work, observing (among other things) that he had “defended ... the value and power of human reason and ... prove[d] by unquestionably valid arguments the existence of God.”

By the 1920s, Catholics were thus religiously obligated to follow St. Thomas. The obligation was laid most stringently upon seminaries, but applied to the colleges too. This brings us to the *second* factor that made its adoption particularly timely. The point is that by the 1920s, the colleges had completed their organizational modernization and were therefore in a position to translate the Pope’s Thomistic mandate into up-to-date credit-hour requirements in Neoscholastic philosophy. They did so with a vengeance – by early thirties even Catholic women’s colleges were requiring an average of 12 to 14 hours of Neoscholastic philosophy.

The *third* factor that came into play at that time also had to do with the recently completed organizational modernization. In that process, Catholic educators had adopted so many of the forms and practices of the secular academy that they were worried about losing their

distinctive religious identity altogether. Hence they welcomed Neoscholastic philosophy (and I stress we are talking about *philosophy*, not *theology*) because it supplied a rational basis for faith, thereby allowing collegians to ground their religious beliefs in mode appropriate to their status as thinking adults.

The *fourth* consideration that made its adoption particularly timely was that, by synthesizing faith and reason, Neoscholasticism constituted a unifying principle for all of learning. It could therefore serve as the integrating principle for a curriculum that had been fragmented by the changes introduced as part of the modernization process.

The *fifth* point is that natural law, which was an integral feature of Neoscholasticism, had applications in politics, social teaching, the family, and ethics generally. Hence it could not only serve as a personal “philosophy of life,” it also furnished the cognitive basis for a truly humane culture in the larger society.

Finally, by 1930 American Catholics were beginning to see themselves as part of a great intellectual and cultural movement, centered in Europe, which had grown up around the Scholastic Revival. This “Catholic Renaissance,” as it was sometimes called, included literary and artistic figures like G. K. Chesterton, Sigrid Undset, Paul Claudel, and Georges Rouault but, for American Catholics, its best known representatives were the philosophers Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson. Likewise well known was the historian Christopher Dawson. His argument that religion constituted the basic element in all the great world cultures meshed neatly with Catholic educators’ understanding of their counter-cultural task – that is, replacing the secularism that dominated American intellectual life with a truly Christian culture.

Neoscholasticism and the Catholic Worldview

So much for the factors that made Neoscholasticism the unifying principle of Catholic higher education and the cognitive foundation of its religious identity – which it was from the 1920s through the 1950s. But what was its substance, and how did it function in those capacities?

Broadly speaking, Neoscholasticism was Aristotelian realism as modified and brought into harmony with Christian revelation by St. Thomas. I won't attempt to summarize it further. For that matter, few educated Catholics of the era of its dominance could have traced its technical ins and outs. But experts who could do so were believed to exist. In other words, Neoscholasticism served for literate Catholics as a systematic rational backup for their overall view of reality – something that properly qualified specialists could deploy in explication and defense of the Catholic worldview.

*(Or, as I expressed it on another occasion, **Neoscholasticism constituted the technical philosophical system that could be called upon to explain, justify, and elaborate the interlinked, but technically informal, set of beliefs Catholics held concerning the nature of reality, the meaning of human existence, and the implications of these beliefs for personal morality, social ethics, political policy, and so on. Understood in this sense, “Catholic worldview” is closely related to “Catholic faith,” but covers more ground than would be included in a definition of faith itself.**)*

The main features of that worldview as it meshed with Neoscholasticism can be listed as follows.

Most basically, Neoscholasticism buttressed religious faith because it reconciled religious faith and natural reason. For not only did this philosophy accord with the teachings of the

Church, it purported to *prove* Catholics' most basic belief – that there is a God – on the basis of reason alone. Some Neoscholastics carried their rationalism to the point of denying that God's existence could be an act of faith because it was provable and therefore *known* rather than *believed*. The standard view, however, distinguished between supernatural faith, for which grace was required, and the “preambles of faith,” which were established by natural reason but which included God's existence and dim analogical inklings of the divine nature. Thus we find a mid-century college theology book initiating an elaborate analysis of “the act of faith” with a reminder that the “preambles of faith” had already been “scientifically proven in our course of Philosophy.”

Secondly, Neoscholasticism underlay Catholics' more generalized confidence in the power of human reason, which was a prominent feature of the Catholic worldview. Catholic writers never tired of contrasting their confidence in “intelligence” – i.e., the capacity of the human mind to grasp objective reality – with the subjectivism, pragmatism, and relativism of modern thinkers. The taken-for-granted quality of Catholic confidence in reason is tellingly captured by G. K. Chesterton's story “The Blue Cross,” in which his fictional detective, Father Brown, spots an imposter by observing that a man passing himself off as a priest spoke slightly of reason.

Other features of the system particularly relevant to higher education have already been noted – namely, Neoscholasticism's potential for serving as a personal “philosophy of life”; its being the integrating principle of the curriculum, and its formative role in shaping the broader culture. Thus a leading Catholic scholar – a Jesuit geophysicist – hailed Scholastic philosophy as “a stable, universal and certain system of thought, a real philosophy of life” to which students

could “anchor all their views and thoughts and knowledge.” At about the same time (around 1930), a Jesuit philosopher noted that Neoscholasticism had “very definite relations to the whole of Catholic thought and a very definite value in building a Catholic world-view.” As such, it made possible “a unity of thought and ... a singleness of outlook on reality.”

A key element of the Catholic worldview closely related to the culture-forming dimension of Neoscholasticism was its synthesizing power – the way it reduced all things to unity, to intelligible order. Because it synthesized natural truth and supernatural revelation, Neoscholasticism made it possible to see all facets of life in their true relationship – to God, to history, and to the human family in general. Peter Guilday, the leading Catholic historian of the time, gave florid expression to this broad outlook view in 1928: “Catholics’ belief in God,” he wrote, “in the purpose of creation, in man’s original fall with its consequences, and in man’s final destiny, enables them to see, even as in a glass darkly, the magnificent unity of life, the stupendously intricate weave of the warp and woof of human existence, and the all-embracing divine guidance of a world which ... was created to know God, to love God and to serve God in this life in order to be happy with Him in the world to come.” Guilday was no philosopher, and he spoke in what might be called strictly pietistic terms, but he *assumed* Neoscholasticism as the rational grounding for this vision of cosmic unity

Admiring references to the Middle Ages occurred so frequently in Catholic writing of this era that “medievalism” might also be listed as a feature of the Catholic worldview. Yet it is better understood as a manifestation of the near obsession with unity and order. For what made the medieval epoch so appealing was the model it supposedly provided of a harmoniously ordered society, a society suffused by the Catholic spirit and structured according to the Catholic

view of reality. Nor was it an accident, as Catholics saw it, that it was in this era that St. Thomas and the other schoolmen worked out the system of thought that articulated this ideal unity at its highest level of abstraction.

The true source of medieval unity and order was, of course, God – and what Catholics thought of as the God-centeredness of human thought, belief, and striving in that age of faith. That same outlook was a key element in the Catholic worldview of the interwar years. That is, an intense God-centeredness, an emphasis on the supernatural, an insistence on viewing all things *sub specie aeternitatis* underlay the whole movement of the Catholic revival and constituted one of its most essential features. It involved much more than rationality, important as that was, and central as it was to Neoscholasticism. For God's *being* did more than illuminate the human intellect. Once understood, the divine plan for humankind required action, a commitment to its fulfillment on the part of every believer. Beyond that, God's infinite perfection simultaneously awakened spiritual longings that could be satisfied only by personal union with God. The merging of cognitive, moral, and affective reactions arising from the effort to penetrate more deeply in the philosophical understanding of God is captured in one of the classic spiritual autobiographies of the era. In it, Raissa Maritain, the wife of the most famous representative of the Catholic Renaissance, recalled her first reading of St. Thomas in these words: "To pray, to understand, was for me one and the same thing; the one made me thirst for the other, and that thirst in me I felt to be constantly, and yet never, quenched."

The Dominance and Decline of Neoscholasticism

From the 1920s through the 1950s, Neoscholastic philosophy (*not theology*) reigned supreme in Catholic colleges and universities. Theology was a subject confined to seminaries

until the 1960s, and “religion” as an academic subject was unable to establish itself as an effective curricular competitor to philosophy. In those days, philosophy was taught on a mass basis and constituted the *academic* justification for Catholic colleges’ claim to a distinctive religious identity. It reached its climax in the early 1950s, but came under increasing criticism thereafter; by the late 1960s, Neoscholasticism -- or Thomism, as it was usually called by midcentury -- was completely displaced from its former hegemonic place in the curriculum. What had happened? The question has never been adequately investigated, but we can discern several interrelated factors in its sudden collapse.

First, there was increasing criticism of the way it was taught. This was all but inevitable in view of its being a required subject taught to vast numbers of undergraduates -- by the mid-1950s, to some 2,400 students a semester at Notre Dame. No system of thought could be purveyed on such a scale without being vulgarized in the process. The same point applies to the teaching staff, not all of whom were adequately qualified and whose teaching loads were quite heavy (12 hrs a semester being the norm into the 1960s). The result was undue reliance on textbooks, too much use of objective tests, and complaints from students that philosophy was nothing but “memory work.” Other complaints centered on the intellectual texture of the material as it came through to students -- its dryness, formalistic quality, remoteness from the present, and lack of clear relevance to other subjects in the curriculum that it was supposed to integrate. By the end of the decade warnings about “seminary methods,” and condescending references to “nostalgia for the Middle Ages,” had become almost routine. Thomism was, in short, well on its way to being dismissed by Catholics themselves as an “official ideology,” the teaching of which amounted to little more than “indoctrination in the ‘party line.’”

Unfortunately, such criticism was all too often justified, for as the Catholic publisher, Frank Sheed, once observed, many professors treated Neoscholastic philosophy as material “not to be examined by reason but swallowed as dogma.”

A second major source of dissatisfaction in a sense belies the official-ideology charge because it arose from disagreements among Catholic philosophers about how Thomism itself was to be understood. Historical studies that had been developing since Pope Leo’s original call for a return to St. Thomas had now clearly established that his thought – and that of other medieval schoolmen – was far richer and more complex than the pioneers of the revival had dreamed. The result was what one writer called a “Thomist spectrum” that embraced twelve variations sufficiently different to require separate treatment. Nor were the differences inconsequential for, as another commentator noted, one version claimed that Thomas’s thought *required* pluralism while another denied that it *permitted* pluralism. All this obviously raised a question about Thomism’s role as integrator of the curriculum – for how could a system of thought so diversely understood serve to unify everything else students were learning?

The idea of synthesis itself was problematic – indeed, it was potentially self-destructive, for if everything was bound together in an integral organic wholeness, what happened if any part was shown to be erroneous? John Courtney Murray, SJ, the leading American Catholic theologian of day, took note of that hypothetical danger. After stating that, by virtue of Thomism’s synthesis of revealed truth and philosophical truth, “the certainty and value of each truth is confirmed by that of all the others, and by the solidity of the whole edifice itself,” he went on to say any error that somehow crept into the system “would shatter not only a particular truth but the whole Catholic *corpus doctrinae*.”

When he wrote those words in 1944, Murray clearly regarded the admission of error and the shattering of the synthesis as an impossible hypothesis. But by 1960, many challenges to the system were in the air. And with wholesale re-thinking of Catholic teaching and practice set in motion by the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65, the famous synthesis went down like a house of cards. True, there were still Neoscholastic philosophers on the faculties of Catholic colleges and universities, but they were a beleaguered remnant by comparison to their former glory, and their subject had lost all semblance of its former role as the lynch-pin of Catholic academic identity.

This, in drastic summary, is what happened to the synthesis of faith and reason in Catholic colleges. Let me repeat, I am not a philosopher and make no judgment as to the soundness of Neoscholasticism as a system of thought, versions of which respected philosophers continue to champion. All I claim to be doing is tracing its rise and fall as the curricular keystone of Catholic colleges and universities from the 1920s to the 1960s.

How is this relevant for Evangelicals?

That is really a question for Evangelicals to answer. But let me call attention to a couple of points.

First, the respective roles of centralized authority in the two traditions suggests it would be much more difficult for Evangelicals to impose any system of thought as thoroughly – not to say monolithically – as happened in the case of Catholics and Neoscholasticism. As everyone knows, centralized authority is one of the principal distinguishing features of Roman Catholicism. In the case at hand, papal authority was absolutely essential to giving the thought of St. Thomas its hegemonic status in Catholic higher education, and in enforcing its acceptance in

such stringent manner.

A related, but distinguishable, condition has to do with the historic role of religious communities in Catholic higher education. I am referring here to the fact that religious communities were in charge of the very great majority of Catholic colleges and universities. Since their members are vowed to *religious obedience*, they are subject to ecclesiastical authority in ways that do not apply to lay persons. Moreover, Neoscholasticism was a key element in the historic traditions of two religious orders, the Jesuits and the Dominicans. The latter had few colleges of their own, but the Jesuits were by far the most important order engaged in higher education. So they were, in a sense, doubly committed to Neoscholasticism.

If these two considerations suggest it would be more difficult for Evangelicals to emulate the Catholic example, the experience of Catholics might also have some cautionary value. For what the Catholic example shows is that adopting and enforcing an official school philosophy creates problems of its own. It obviously forecloses other intellectual possibilities and introduces an unhealthy element of rigidity, even if it does not degenerate into an ideology in the pejorative sense of the word. To the degree that it is wholeheartedly accepted, it is almost bound to result in a premature closure on truth, and to nurture the complacent assumption that all the questions that really matter have already been settled. Most dangerously, perhaps, it over-extends and over-determines religious faith, and by doing so makes faith itself more brittle.

All belief, someone has said, aspires to the condition of rational belief. Perhaps that is a commonplace among philosophers. I am not a philosopher, but the statement seems right to me, and I am fully persuaded that redeeming reason, and reconciling faith and reason, are goals devoutly to be wished. At the same time, I believe the experience of American Catholics stands

witness to the difficulty of the task and the perils that attend it.