

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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Thomas Aquinas and the Reform of Christian Education

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My story begins where it ends with a few remarks about Umberto Eco's international best seller, *The Name of the Rose* (W. Weaver translation, New York, 1983), a novel dealing with a series of strange murders that disrupt the life of a once peaceful medieval monastery whose library, presided over by a blind and aged monk, was reputed to be the finest in all of Christendom. The dark mystery surrounding these murders is pierced by a philosophical sleuth named William of Baskerville, who represents a cross between William of Ockham and Sherlock Holmes, two men of outstanding intellectual virtue. We eventually discover that the hideous crimes were perpetrated by none other than the librarian himself, not for any selfish motive, but in the name of religion and for the sake of its preservation. By a fortuitous turn of events, the monastery had come into possession of the missing portion of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the one devoted to comedy, which the old man was determined to keep out of everybody's reach because its recovery boded nothing but evil for the Christian faith.

Comedy, he reasoned, extols the base at the expense of the noble, the low at the expense of the high. By heaping ridicule on things that ought to be held sacred, it foments doubt and functions as a tool with which to dismantle "every holy and venerable image" (p. 476). The laughter that it provokes is a vile sport, fit for "villeins" and fools, who indulge in it for the sole purpose of allaying their secret fears. The true name of fear is fear of God. Whereas tragedy instills that fear into our hearts, comedy cancels it. It teaches that to free oneself from it is the beginning of wisdom. Christ did not laugh and neither should we. That the rabble should do so is of no consequence since nobody takes them seriously anyway. The case of Aristotle was different. His treatise made comedy respectable, an object of esteem on the part of the wise and the learned. It elevated it to the rank of an art and conferred upon it a dignity to which it is not entitled and that it would never have enjoyed otherwise. Therein lay the danger. Allowing such a book to become known was "the Luciferine spark that would set fire to the whole world" (p.475).

The pious monk was not entirely mistaken. If he was afraid of Aristotle, it is not because he had misunderstood him but because he had understood him only too well; for it is certainly the case that the recovery of Aristotelian philosophy had led by an implacable logic to numerous encroachments on the domain of faith. His shortsighted strategy nevertheless backfired. The futile attempt to halt the diffusion of the new ideas resulted only in the destruction of the monastery

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and, therewith, of the whole world of faith and learning for which it stood. As William explains earlier in the novel, the hiding of books may be of some use in a space of years or days, but “over the centuries it is no use at all” (p. 286).

Eco’s novel illustrates in vivid fashion the problem that lies at the heart of the educational endeavors of the Middle Ages: that of reconciling the truths that come to us from divine revelation with the philosophical wisdom of Greece and Rome. The medieval university, which has no exact equivalent in antiquity and out of which grew our own modern university with its formal program of studies, its division into faculties, and its practice of awarding degrees, was originally created for the express purpose of dealing with this problem. By and large, the new institution sought to promote the twin goals of classical education, namely, the formation of the human being and the citizen, but with the understanding that these goals would henceforth be subordinated to the higher goal of forming Christians. Three terms sum up the ideals to which it was dedicated: “humanity,” “civility,” and “Christianity”—*humanitas*, *civilitas*, *christianitas*. Although the three overlapped to some extent, they were by no means identical. Human nature is the same always and everywhere, whereas citizenship inevitably varies from place to place and from one moment in history to another. As for Christianity, it was but one of the religions among which the medieval world in its totality was divided. The object was to determine how all three goals could be made to support one another and collaborate in reasonably harmonious fashion.

How this state of affairs had come about is a long story only the main lines of which need to be recounted for present purposes. The first point to note is that the Christian tradition is the only one of the great religious traditions of the West to have incorporated the study of philosophy into its curriculum. The reason it was able to do so is that, unlike Judaism and Islam, Christianity presents itself first and foremost, not as a sacred law or a divinely mandated social system encompassing every aspect of human life and thought, but as a “faith” or a sacred doctrine the basic tenets of which lend themselves more readily to, and in a sense invite, the kind of rational investigation that is associated with the notion of theology. Significantly, the use of the word “theology” to designate the scientific study of the divinely revealed truth dates only from the twelfth century and is a direct product of the novel efforts that were then made to clarify, organize, and if need be defend the datum of Revelation. Prior to that time, “theology” had meant, as it does for Plato and Aristotle, the teachings of the poets regarding the gods, or else that part of Christian dogmatics which concerns itself with the nature of God in contradistinction to the “economy” or the divine governance of the universe.

It should be added that much of groundwork for these efforts had been laid by the early church fathers, to whom belongs the honor of being the first to introduce philosophy into the fold and transform it into an instrument capable of leading to a more penetrating grasp of the content of their religious beliefs—

the so-called “intelligence of the faith,” *intellectus fidei*, as distinguished from the simple “rule of faith,” *regula fidei*. Not everyone was convinced of the legitimacy of such an endeavor. Some Christian writers were vehemently opposed to the study of the pagan classics on grounds similar to those of Eco’s librarian and would gladly have boycotted them altogether. To anyone who already possessed the whole truth, the philosophical “quest” (*zêtêsis*) for wisdom was impious or, at the very least, superfluous. St. Paul himself had repeatedly warned against it, and with good reason (e.g., Col. 2:8; I Tim. 1:4 and 6:4; II Tim. 2:22; Tit. 3:9). Nowhere in his Letters was it possible to find an element of praise for it. Pagan literature and learning were the pods that one gave to swine and on which the Prodigal Son had fed after squandering his share of the paternal heritage (cf. Luke 15:16). In Tertullian’s famous phrase, Athens had nothing whatever to do with Jerusalem:

Poor Aristotle, who invented dialectics, the art of building up and tearing down; an art so evasive in its propositions, so farfetched in its conjectures, so harsh in its arguments, so productive of contentions—embarrassing even to itself, retracting everything and really treating of nothing! Whence spring those “fables and endless genealogies,” “sterile questions,” and “words that spread like a cancer?” From all these, when the apostle would restrain us, he expressly names “philosophy” as that against which he would have us be on our guard. Writing to the Colossians, he says, “See that no one beguile you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men and contrary to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.” He had been at Athens and had become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, while it only corrupts it and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies by a variety of mutually repugnant sects. What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church, between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon,” who had himself been taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.” Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Jesus Christ, no inquiry after enjoying the gospel! (*On the Exclusion of Heretics*, 7.)

To the question of whether Christians ought to be educated or not there was a ready answer: they had only to read the Bible, which was admirably suited to the fulfillment of every intellectual need. Anyone interested in first principles could turn to the Book of Genesis, which contained a sublime account of the origins of all things. For moral philosophy, there was the wisdom literature of the Old Testament; for history, all of its historical books; and for poetry, the Psalms, the sheer beauty of whose language was unmatched by anything that might be encountered elsewhere.

Others found the argument less than persuasive and decided that more would have to be done if Christians were to equal their pagan counterparts in intellectual achievement. The Bible was, after all, a bit short on rational discourse.

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Important as it may have been in every other respect, it did not back up its assertions with any sort of argument and made no pretense of supplying the disciplines through which the human mind is perfected. As one contemporary scholar has remarked, the only biblical character to give a reason for anything is the serpent in Genesis, and he is not generally held in odor of sanctity. Unlike Aristotle's unmoved mover, the God of Sacred Scripture does not come across in the first instance as a thinking being. This did not mean, however, that his children were forbidden to think. The cult that he demanded was a "reasonable cult," *logike latreia* (Rom. 12:1), one that entailed the use of reason. Paul's strictures relative to the quest for new knowledge were to be taken seriously, but they were not the New Testament's last word on the subject, for Christ himself had said: "Seek (*zêteite*) and you shall find."¹ Hence pagan wisdom could not simply be equated with the pods eaten by the Prodigal Son. It was more like the captive woman of Deuteronomy, whom the faithful Israelite was legally permitted to take as a wife once the battle had been won and all the male enemies duly slaughtered (Deut. 21:10–14). Granted, there were certain conditions to be met: the poor woman had to shave her head, pare her nails, get rid of her pagan ornaments, and be given a full month to bewail her kin; but if, at the end of that relatively mild ordeal, the romance was still on, the marriage could take place. The same wisdom was also needed to fight the opponents of Christianity with their own weapons, in which case it could be compared to the sword that the young David managed to wrest from his more powerful adversary and with which he then proceeded to cut off his head. (Cf. *inter alia*, St. Jerome, *Letter 70* [to Magnus].)

The problem might have been less acute were it not for the fact that Christians had no schools of their own and were therefore totally dependent on the pagan school for their formal education. Like it or not, all young students had to read Homer or Virgil, at the risk of being exposed to a way of life that stood at a considerable remove from the moral ideal of the Gospel and was often in open conflict with it. The only remedy was to interpret these authors in such a way as to give the impression that what they taught was not really that different from what Christians believed.

One of the finest examples that we have of this "Christian" reading of the pagan classics is Basil the Great's address *To Young Men on the Benefits to Be Derived from the Writings of the Greeks*,² which is all the more remarkable as it contains a large number of references to classical texts, rendered literally or more often in the form of a paraphrase, from a wide range of poets and prose writers. What is peculiar about it is that all these citations have been subtly distorted and given a Christian, or pre-Christian, or quasi-Christian meaning. Even Odysseus is held up as a model of outstanding moral virtue and praised for, of all things, his truthfulness. It does not take much ingenuity to realize that, far from bearing out Basil's contention, the original text proves the exact opposite. It reveals an Odysseus who lives on everyone's lips with his "wiles"

rather than his virtuous deeds and who is a consummate liar to boot (*Odyssey*, IX,19–20). The trick consisted in editing the text without letting on that this is what one was doing and hence without arousing the student's curiosity any more than was necessary. There is every reason to think that Basil himself was fully aware of the liberties he was taking with his sources. In two distinct but related passages, he chides those who think of happiness only in terms of "overloaded tables" and "dissolute songs" and who "range over every land and sea, as if compelled to pay tribute to some exacting master by their ceaseless activity." Yet he knew that the restless traveler who scours earth and sea in search of adventure, but nonetheless politely agrees with his Phaeacian hosts that life is never more pleasant than when the houses are filled with music, the tables laden with bread and meats, and the cups overflowing with wine freshly drawn from the mixing bowls (cf. *ibid.*, IX,5–10) is none other than the fabled Odysseus, who has just been hailed as the epitome of every Christian virtue.

Why Basil should have adopted this method of procedure is not difficult to imagine. Good readers are rare. It is a matter of common experience that what most people find in a book is little more than what they themselves bring to it. Having been taught that the best part of classical literature was devoted to the praise of virtue, the young student would be predisposed to look for a confirmation of that view in any poem that he chanced to come across. The risk involved in the contact with a pagan writer was neutralized in advance by the superimposition of a Christian image that not only valorized certain elements at the expense of others but created the illusion of a greater kinship than actually existed between the poet's thought and the teaching of the Bible.³ All in all, the pedagogy had much to recommend it. By reflecting on it, one catches a faint glimpse of the enormous spiritual transformation that the passage from a pagan to a Christian civilization demanded and in turn effected. Before three centuries had elapsed, the lowly Christians whom Celsus, the earliest philosophic critic of the new faith, had mocked as "theologizing fishermen" had become the intellectual elite of the Roman Empire.

The only ancient writer to draw up a blueprint of what a Christian school might look like if it were to be established is Augustine, who, in Book II of his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*, lists all of the human disciplines as they were then known with a view to showing how they can contribute to a better knowledge of the truths of the Christian faith. It is therefore not surprising that Augustine's work, on which the medieval university was largely based, has been read by modern scholars as a treatise of "Christian culture." Its aim is less to resolve the difficulties inherent in any attempt to bridge the gulf between pagan and Christian thought than to sketch the type of education that is called for in a society that takes the Bible as its ultimate norm. Accordingly, the whole of the *enkuklios paideia* or liberal arts program of the ancients, which included the mathematical arts on one side—mathematics proper, geometry, astronomy, and music—and the arts of language on the other—grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic—

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tic—is inserted into a larger framework and provided with a new rationale. Already at work in this scheme, in theory if not in actual practice, is the famous “reduction of the arts to theology,” *reductio artium ad theologiam*, that characterizes medieval education at its peak. It is typical of Augustine’s rather more Platonic than Aristotelian approach to this matter that it views all things in the light of their very highest principles. In the end, there is one and only one wisdom, *una sapientia*, which is informed and governed by divine revelation. Any other knowledge to which the human mind may have access, including the whole of pagan philosophy, is at best partial and uncertain. Christianity and it alone is the highroad to human wholeness or perfection.

The trouble that later writers would have with this view is that it takes for granted that the Christian faith is the only true faith and hence that anyone who rejects it after having known it is necessarily at fault. As long as Christianity was all but universally acknowledged in the West, there was no reason to quarrel with it, and indeed it remained the dominant view among theologians to the end of the Middle Ages. The first great challenge to it came with the rediscovery and the Latin translation of Aristotle’s works during the first half of the thirteenth century. It has been rightly pointed out that, in the person of Aristotle, the West was confronted, not just with a new philosophy, but with philosophy simply. Here for the first time was a complete, fully developed, and coherent account of human life that owed nothing to divine revelation and could conceivably be construed as an alternative to it. The Arts Faculty, where philosophy was taught and whose role had previously been limited to that of a propaedeutic to the study of theology, suddenly assumed greater prominence and became the locus of the liveliest debates among scholars. Its Masters, who had been in the habit of moving up to theology as soon as circumstances permitted, were no longer quite so eager to leave philosophy and began to make a lifelong career of teaching it.

The crisis that ensued shook the foundations of Christendom and has been described by a distinguished historian with a penchant for sweeping generalizations as one of the four major crises of recorded history, the other three being the Aryan invasions of the second millennium B.C., the fall of the Roman Empire, and the still unresolved crisis of present-day western civilization.⁴ The whole issue came to a climax in 1277 with the condemnation by the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, of 219 propositions culled or condensed from the works of the Arts masters and judged to be totally at odds with the basic truths of the Christian faith.⁵ Tempier, whose action has been severely criticized by modern scholars, was in fact more broadminded than most of them are willing to grant. What he objected to was not that these controversial matters were being debated in the schools but that the Masters engaged in the debate had chosen to make a public issue of them, thereby endangering the faith of simple Christians. The irony is that by promulgating his syllabus Tempier unwittingly

did as much as anyone to bring the infamous doctrines to the attention of a larger audience. From that moment on, no educated person would be ignorant of them.

Be that as it may, the challenge had already been met to some extent by Thomas Aquinas, who undertook to reform the whole of theology in accordance with the situation created by the rising tide of Aristotelianism. Whereas Augustine had thought only in terms of a “single wisdom”—*una sapientia*—which included all of the truths uncovered by the pagan philosophers and brought them to completion, Thomas spoke of two wisdoms or two perfect wholes, one governed by principles that are available to the unaided human reason, and the other by principles that exceed the mind’s natural capacity and are thus knowable only through divine revelation. With or without any further intervention on God’s part, the universe had its proper perfection inasmuch as it contained within itself that by means of which it is capable of attaining its end or of returning to its principle. Grace does not destroy the nature; it merely elevates it by assigning to it an end that is higher than any to which it might aspire or even be aware of when left to itself. With unprecedented boldness, the very first question of the *Summa of Theology* asks “whether, besides the philosophical sciences, some other science is needed,” namely, sacred science—*Utrum sit necessarium, praeter philosophicas disciplinas, aliam doctrinam haberi*—almost as if to imply that divine revelation was somehow expendable. The question was not without far-reaching practical implications. Speaking figuratively, Augustine has warned that one cannot safely appropriate the spoils of the Egyptians, that is to say, pagan learning and philosophy, without first observing the Passover (*On Christian Doctrine*, II, 40–41). Thomas, on the other hand, evinces a greater willingness to postpone the celebration of the Passover until the Egyptians have been despoiled and even until such time as the whole land of Canaan has been duly annexed. It goes without saying that, since the order of nature and the order of grace both stem from God, they are necessarily in harmony with each other. If, by any chance, human reason should perceive a contradiction between them, it can only be because it has gone astray and rashly assented to propositions that are neither self-evident nor demonstrably true.

The great merit of the new approach was that, by recognizing the legitimacy and the integrity of the natural order, it provided a common ground of discussion between Christians and other believers as well as between believers and nonbelievers. It also supplied the natural foundations of political rule and thus made for a clearer distinction between the spiritual and temporal powers. Although Thomas seldom dwells on this problem, his use of Aristotle’s *Politics* gave a new impetus to political philosophy and encouraged others to delve more deeply into it. As a result, the notion of citizenship regained some of the importance that it had lost over the centuries and became a major concern of

such prominent writers as Dante and Marsilius of Padua. Dante himself would soon resurrect the term *politizare* in order to describe the type of political activity that had again become possible (see esp. Dante, *Monarchy* I, 12).

These general observations call for a series of additional remarks, which, I hope, will bring the problem into sharper focus. The first is that Thomas's attempt to harmonize biblical faith and Aristotelian philosophy needs to be interpreted judiciously and in the light of the theological context to which it belongs. Thomas himself appears to have been fully cognizant of the limits of any such enterprise. It is by no means evident, for instance, that Aristotle's notion of virtue as expounded in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is compatible with the true spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. There is, after all, a world of difference between the magnanimous man who takes pride in his noble deeds, seeks above all to please himself, and finds his greatest reward in the honor bestowed upon him by his fellow human beings, and the humble follower of Christ who despises honors, is taught to think of others rather than of himself, and joyfully accepts to be held in contempt and even die for his divine master—*contemni et mori pro te*—just as there is a world of difference between the courageous warrior who sacrifices himself and everything that is dearest to him for his country and the saintly Christian who gives up his earthly life in exchange for a greater reward in heaven. The actions may be materially the same in both cases, but, as Pascal would later say, they belong to two formally different and incommensurable orders.

The second remark has to do with the Aristotelian notion of nature, which Thomas was the first to exploit to the full and which met with fierce opposition on the part of the other theologians inasmuch as it posed a direct threat to biblical notion of divine omnipotence. If God is the supreme master of all and if the whole of creation depends on him not only for its coming into being but for its internal structure, it is hard to think of nature as endowed with an intelligible necessity over which no one, not even God, has any control. Between divine freedom and philosophical necessitarianism there seemed to be no middle ground and hence no possible compromise. Scotus tried valiantly to find a way out of the dilemma by positing the existence of an indefinite number of ideas in the divine mind, among which God was free to choose if he decided to create, as in fact he did. This means, however, that the universe as we know it is only one of a variety of possible and equally contingent universes. The same tendency was carried to its logical conclusion by William of Ockham, who denied the existence of intelligible natures or universal ideas altogether. On this telling, God is at liberty to do or command whatever he likes. He could even order us to hate him if he so desired. There are no limits, intrinsic or extrinsic, to the exercise of his absolutely free will.

Thomas's own solution to this thorny problem avoids the extremes of intellectualism and voluntarism insofar as it seeks to preserve both the intrinsic intelligibility of the the universe and its total dependence on God as creator.

One of the consequences of this more moderate stance is that it understands virtuous behavior as essentially a matter of reason rather than of blind obedience to the commands of a capricious God. Education has a crucial role to play in it and can be pursued without any offense to the divine majesty. It is nonetheless true that, even as he strives to preserve the thrust of Aristotle's analysis of the moral life, Thomas subverts it by capping the natural virtues with a constellation of infused or supernatural virtues; for, the person who believes in the superiority of these supernatural virtues is bound to differ in character from the one who thinks that the only virtues worth cultivating are the ones to which nature points as the highest of all possible human achievements.

This brings me to my next point, which is that Thomas's philosophy and, for that matter, the whole of medieval philosophy assumes a tone that is rather more doctrinaire than that of classical philosophy. This should not cause any great surprise, given the extreme importance that attaches to the unity of doctrine, as opposed to the unity of social structures, in the Christian world. Three great issues came to dominate the intellectual scene: the notion of creation, divine providence and foreknowledge, and the personal immortality of the human soul. Those were the issues on which the theological tradition and the nonreligious philosophic tradition parted company and understandably so, since they touched upon the rational premises on which belief in divine revelation was predicated. If it could be shown conclusively that God has nothing to do with this world, has no knowledge of or control over human affairs, and does not mete out justice in the next world, theology was in ruins. Because it took these possibilities seriously, philosophy was singled out by some theologians as the enemy par excellence, the very "tree of the knowledge of good and evil," as Bonaventure went so far as to call it:

Philosophy must bow before the dictate of eternal truth and not before that of mere rational thought in the worthless manner of the ancient (pagan) thinkers. Do you seek to enjoy God's threefold mercy? Be a humble servant by despising yourself, assisting your neighbor, and respecting God. What is Christian philosophy? It is humility. . . . Those who love Holy Scripture also love philosophy insofar as it strengthens their faith; but philosophy is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for its truth is mixed with error. If you are an imitator of the philosophers, you say, 'How could Aristotle be mistaken?' and you do not love Holy Scripture; you necessarily fall away from faith. If you say the world is eternal, you know nothing of Christ. If you say there is but one intelligence in all things, no happiness after this life and no resurrection of the dead—if you eat of this tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you are falling away from faith. Those who study the philosophers must be on their guard; everything contrary to Christ's teaching must be avoided as being deadly for the soul (Third Sunday of Advent, Sermon 2, in *Works*, IX, 62–63).

The problem was more subtle than it appears to be at first glance, for it lay not so much in the fact that the philosophers rejected these pivotal doctrines,

although they sometimes did, as in the fact that they questioned their demonstrability. What distinguishes the philosophical mind at its highest is its determination to withhold judgment on any issue in regard to which human reason alone is unable to arrive at a definite conclusion. In the final analysis the contest was not between two mutually exclusive and equally dogmatic positions but between theological dogmatism on the one hand and a peculiar brand of philosophical skepticism on the other.

The same skepticism inevitably spilled over into other domains and particularly into the domain of morality, where its potentially dangerous implications were even more obvious. Centuries earlier, John Chrysostom had observed that if the farmer and the blacksmith, the carpenter and the pilot, and all those who live from the work of their hands had to wait for Plato to tell them what justice is, they would have to abandon their trades and would die of starvation before ever having had a chance to perform a just deed (cf. *Hom. in Matt.*, I,11). The practical advantage of the theological position was that it removed any lingering doubt concerning the ultimate goodness of justice and thus offered the clarity and firmness of direction that for the most part constitute the prerequisites of decent human behavior. Its vision was that of a morally consistent universe in which the good are always rewarded and the wicked always punished. The disadvantage was that its teachings rested on theoretical premises whose certitude left something to be desired. The “dogmatism” on which it had to fall back recalls in some manner the dogmatism of the early modern period, for which it may have remotely paved the way, although it is important to observe that this dogmatism has its roots in divine revelation and thus differs sharply from the dogmatism based on radical skepticism that typifies so much of modern thought.

What we finally come to is a conflict or, if not that, at least a permanent tension at the heart of the western tradition, with neither side being in a position to establish its own claims or refute those of the other. Only a completed or “systematic” philosophy, that is to say, a philosophy that has succeeded in giving an adequate account of the universe in terms of its intrinsic causes, as distinguished from a philosophy that understands itself as an unfinished and unfinishable quest for the truth, can claim to have ruled out the possibility of divine revelation; and, conversely, only a theology that has succeeded in dispelling the mystery in which it is ultimately grounded, even if by so doing it should destroy itself, can command universal assent. This tension between the two most noble guides to life that human consciousness at its highest level has brought to light is not necessarily something to be lamented. It can be fruitful as long as one knows how to live it, or as long as philosophy remains open to theology and theology to philosophy. It may even account for the enormous intellectual vitality that western thought has demonstrated across the centuries.

My fourth and last comment concerns the predominantly dialectical tone of medieval university education. To anyone trained in the classical tradition, one

of the most striking features of Scholasticism, as it came to be called, is its unerotic or “unmusical” character. By that time, the Bible had replaced the Muses and a true story had been substituted for the beautiful lies of the poet as the mandatory starting point of one’s ascent to the higher realms of learning. Homer and Virgil were no longer authorities to be reckoned with and the view of the world reflected in their works had ceased to be a live option. The West, of course, had never known Homer save through the mediation of the Latin poets, and the infinitely more gentle and pious Virgil had long been co-opted as an unconscious precursor of the new age. Whereas the Church Fathers wrote books that still had a distinctly rhetorical cast, their Scholastic followers produced philosophical commentaries and theological disputations. Dogma was subjected to the regime of dialectics and the cold syllogism in all its forms became the preferred medium of intellectual communication. It is symptomatic of the spirit of the age that, in the Thomistic scheme, poetry is treated as a part of logic and not as a part of politics, as it had been by Plato and Aristotle. Its chief interest resides in its being a mode of discourse among others, a first feeble attempt at knowledge, the lowest in fact of the disciplines—*infima disciplina*—inferior even to rhetoric in so far as the poet uses images or metaphors rather than plausible arguments to convey his thoughts (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics of Aristotle*, Prooemium). In a world that was already overwhelmingly Christian, both rhetoric and poetry had lost their real *raison d’être* and survived only in the form of sermons and liturgical hymns calculated to reinforce a faith that practically everyone accepted. The days were past when one had to make a case for that faith and win people over to it by appealing to their passions. Medieval Christendom is one of the few great civilizations known to us which had God and not some outstanding poet as its educator. There was a price to be paid for this extraordinary privilege. As time went on, theology itself became ever more abstract, indulging in refinements that sapped its vitality and had little significance beyond the quarrels that pitted rival schools of thought against one another. The spirit of genuine inquiry was gradually lost, as was the insight into the problems that had given rise to it two centuries earlier.

The crucial turning point came toward the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth. Heralded by the crisis of 1277 to which I have already alluded, it found its literary expression in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the poetic masterpiece of the Middle Ages and the encyclopedic work in which the various strands of medieval thought come together in a new and dazzling synthesis. In no other medieval work are the goals of humanity, civility or citizenship, and Christianity more deftly interwoven and brought into finer harmony with one another. Original in its literary form, the *Comedy* is no less novel in its attempt both to introduce the Muses into the Christian world and to revalidate the notion of citizenship. It is a matter of chance that northern Italy, with its plethora of small communes, had begun to experience a rebirth of the politi-

cal life, but it is not a matter of chance that the *Comedy*, which is thoroughly political in its inspiration, should have done so much to foster that rebirth. That political horizon is nevertheless only the first of its three great horizons. Beyond it lay the larger horizon of the philosopher, whose Olympian gaze ranges from beginning to end of the universe and who, from the lofty vantage point of the heaven of the fixed stars, can look back toward that “little threshing floor” called Earth on which the endless drama of human passion is played out, sometimes with astonishing fierceness:

With my sight I returned through all and each
of the seven spheres, and saw this globe
such that I smiled at its paltry appearance;
and that counsel I approve as best
which holds it for least; and he whose mind is
turned elsewhere
can truly be called righteous (*Par.*, 22,133–38).

Finally, this philosophical horizon, vast as it may have been, is itself encompassed by the presumably larger horizon opened up in the last ten cantos of the *Comedy*, that of divine revelation.

The old ambiguities remain, however, and they haunt Dante’s poem as much as they had haunted the works of his classical mentors. We know from Aristotle and his medieval disciples that it is only in the best regime that the good man and the good citizen coincide, and we know from not a few of Dante’s contemporaries that an analogous question was being raised in regard to the relationship between the good man and the good Christian. Since no one has ever seen the best regime except in books, human beings rarely have any choice but to make the best of the flawed political arrangements under which they are called upon to live. Given the right education, by which I mean the kind of education that is geared to the development of our common nature and not just education in the spirit of the regime, the more fortunate or gifted ones could aspire to a degree of intellectual and moral perfection far superior to that of society at large. Admittedly, the scheme was not foolproof, for it was unable to guarantee that noble and decent human beings would never have to suffer at the hands of some tyrant or tyrannical mob. Part of the ambition of the Christian Middle Ages was precisely to guard against such an eventuality by subjecting government to the rule of natural law. With that, the necessary conditions of a just life would always be present and the possibility of a clash between the requirements of humanity, civility, and Christianity would be greatly reduced, if not eliminated once for all.

The cloud in the distance was that human perfection is subject to different understandings according as it is examined in the light of reason alone or in the light of reason illumined by faith. We again come face to face with the problem that had shadowed the efforts of the medieval theologian from the start: the

apparently unresolvable conflict between divine revelation and philosophic reason conceived not merely as two bodies of doctrine but as the grounds of two distinct and irreducibly different ways of life. Where Dante stood on this key issue is a problem that preoccupied his early readers more than it does the vast majority of his twentieth-century commentators. No one doubts that he wrote as a Christian, and to this day his poem stands as the greatest Christian poem in our tradition. To what extent he also thought as a Christian is another matter. The sudden reappearance of the Muses in the midst of a society from which they had supposedly been banished forever comes as a timely reminder of the distance the medieval mind had traveled from its religious beginnings to the increasingly secular orientation of its later years. The gigantic effort to bring the entire realm of politics under the aegis of religion had, it seems, turned against itself and given way to a concerted attempt on the part of influential thinkers to reinsert the whole of religion into a political context. Dante himself could find no better way of negotiating the issue of the relationship between divine faith and natural reason than by leaving it to thoughtful readers to make up their own minds as to how that relationship might best be articulated.

In this roundabout fashion we come back to the problem with which we began and which is so aptly formulated by the librarian in Eco's novel. The librarian's mistake was to equate laughter with derision. To be sure, comedy is not without its dangers and can easily become a deadly weapon in the hands of an unscrupulous or irresponsible writer, but this is not its only function and it is certainly not its highest one. As William explains and as the example of Dante demonstrates, there is nothing to prevent it from being placed in the service of truth, nobility, or piety and quite possibly all three at once. In this regard, its status is no different from that of the other intellectual disciplines, which can likewise be put to a variety of uses, some good and some bad. Augustine had said as much about rhetoric, the art of the sophist as well as that of the statesman, which others had accused him of employing and which he was obliged to defend against his detractors:

Since by means of the art of rhetoric both truth and falsehood are urged, who would dare to say that truth should stand in the person of its defenders unarmed against lying, so that those who wish to urge falsehoods may know how to make their listeners benevolent, or attentive, or docile in their presentation, while the defenders of truth are ignorant of that art? Should they speak briefly, clearly, and plausibly while the defenders of truth speak in such a way as to tire their listeners, make themselves difficult to understand, and render what they have to say dubious? Should they oppose the truth with fallacious arguments and assert falsehoods, while the defenders of truth have no ability either to defend the truth or to oppose the false? Should they, urging the minds of their listeners into error, ardently exhort them, moving them by speech so that they terrify, sadden, and exhilarate them, while the defenders of truth are sluggish, cold, and somnolent? Who is so foolish as to think this to be wisdom? While the faculty of eloquence, which is of great

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value in urging either evil or justice, is in itself indifferent, why should it not be obtained for the uses of the good in the service of truth if the evil usurp it for the winning of perverse and vain causes in defense of iniquity and error? (*On Christian Doctrine*, IV.ii,3.)

Eco's librarian was a fanatic whose animosity toward Aristotle was rooted in fear, which he could detect in others but not in himself. That is why he was willing to go to any extreme, not excluding murder, to achieve his otherwise commendable goal. What he failed to see is that in this instance the proposed remedy was worse than the disease. His physical blindness is only a symbol of the blindness that afflicted the eye of his mind. Dante was more clever and more successful. His solution had the advantage of preserving both Aristotle and the Christian faith instead of sacrificing one to the other.

What in the end is the legacy of the Middle Ages and what light does it shed on the issues that face us at the present moment? My all too sketchy remarks may or may not provide the basis for an adequate answer to this broad question. Still, it should be obvious that our own age, which seems to have lost confidence in itself and in which conviction, to the extent that it exists, is grounded in neither reason nor Revelation, has much to learn from a civilization that prized them above all else. I know of no university today where the Bible and the philosopher whom Dante called "the master of those who know" are taken with anything like the seriousness that our medieval predecessors brought to their study. The paradox in all of this is that the age that is customarily referred to as the "age of faith" is also the age in which Aristotle was held in highest honor. I take it as a sure sign of our predicament that the only two religious thinkers of the modern period to enjoy almost universal respect are Pascal and Kierkegaard, both of them notorious critics of reason. Religion and philosophy are still with us, but in their present form they hardly give us an inkling of what it might mean to live in a world that is permeated with divine and human meaning. The former is either divorced from reason or condescendingly subsumed under the category of myth; the latter, even when not reduced to a dessicating empiricism or the mere therapeutization of our language games, has retreated into a metaphysical and ethical neutrality that deprives it of any possibility of guiding our choices as human beings and citizens. "Values" are the order of the day, and each individual is free to choose his own or to refuse the choice if that happens to be his personal value. Little wonder that the modern university should have decided to call itself a "multiversity." It has no principle of order, and without such a principle, there is no wisdom. Hopeless as it appears to be, the situation nevertheless has a relative advantage over other, more stable situations. Insofar as it is characterized by the shaking of all traditions and cultural horizons, it allows for a reconsideration of the fundamental human alternatives in ways that would have been unthinkable at other moments in our history. The sense of disintegration that so many of our

thoughtful contemporaries have experienced is itself an invitation to undertake a fresh or nontraditional assessment of the tradition to which the ruling consciousness of our day is the mostly unconscious heir.

ENDNOTES

1. Matt., 7:7. See, on this subject, J. Danielou, "Recherche et tradition chez les Peres du IIe et du IIIe siecles," *Nouvelle Revue Theologique* 94 (1972), 449–61.

2. English translation in A. Pegis, *The Wisdom of Catholicism* (New York, 1949), 9–26.

3. For further details concerning Basil's method of procedure, cf. E.L. Fortin, "Christianity and Hellenism in Basil the Great's Address *Ad Adulescentes*," in H.J. Blumenthal and R.A. Markus, eds., *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honour of A.H. Armstrong* (London, 1981), 189–211.

4. S. Mazzarino, *Aspetti sociali del quarto secolo: Ricerche di storia trado-romana* (Rome, 1951), Introd.

5. See, for an English translation of Tempier condemnation, R. Lerner and M. Mahdi, eds., *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (New York, 1963), 335–54.