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Cultural Wars, Then and Now

Richard J. McGowan

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The Islamic world: cartoons provoke riots and death, teachers imprisoned for allowing students to name a teddy bear Muhammad, bombs detonated in markets and on minibuses, rape victims jailed. The Islamic world: leaders of countries reject evidence about the Holocaust and ban the practice of yoga. The Islamic world: irrational behavior in the name of religion.

The Islamic world appears surreal and without historical precedent. However, a person need only look to Western history to observe a culture in the throes of choosing between implosion and world domination, reason and revelation, harmonious thought and religious zealotry. Muslims and the Islamic world face the same situation today that the Christian world faced in the medieval period: How are secular life and religious faith to be reconciled? The question was answered in the 13th century.

The defining event occurred in 1274, namely, the Council of Lyons. The best minds and intellectual champions of various schools of thought, notably Siger de Brabant, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas, were to gather to determine the curriculum at the preeminent center of learning, the University of Paris. Of particular concern was the place of the liberal arts and sciences. Ultimately, more than the curriculum hung in the balance: at stake was the relationship between reason and faith.

The works of Aristotle, little translated before Michael the Scot fastened upon them in 1217, became available through the energy and expertise of William of Moerbeke. William hastened to translate Aristotle for his friend, Thomas Aquinas, the portly Italian friar of the Dominican order.

Greek philosophy had long been available to Muslim thinkers, including Alfarabi, Avicenna, Algazali, and, perhaps greatest of them all, Averroes. Hence, as Aristotle was introduced to the West, Arabic commentators influenced Christian thinkers. Some thinkers accepted the Arabic interpretations while others understood Aristotle's thought in a more original fashion. One scholar put the matter this way:

Two types of Aristotlians arose within the Christian world. There were those (such as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas) who, being theologians, undertook to harmonize Christian and Aristotlian teachings, while there were others who interpreted Aristotle in a purely philosophic fashion.

The latter thinkers, in whose number stood Siger de Brabant, were called "Latin Averroists." With little regard for the teachings of Christianity, they pursued Aristotle's ideas and followed the interpretation given Aristotle's philosophy by Islamic scholars. As Pieper said of them, "Their questioning of tradition was plainly so radical that they did not dare to state it bluntly — perhaps not even to themselves."

What the Latin Averroists did not dare state, not even to themselves, was the possibility of a "double truth," a proposition true on the basis of faith but not true from the perspective of philosophy and vice-versa, true for philosophy but false by way of faith. While the Latin Averroists declared loyalty to their Catholic faith, they also acted as though reason might lead to truths contrary to church teaching. When a potential conflict between faith and reason occurred, they were careful to qualify the "truths" reached by reason. To many church leaders, though, the suggestion that reason could lead to a conclusion incompatible with or unsupported by faith was the same as saying that a "double truth" were possible: a conclusion could be true on the basis of philosophy or from faith but not necessarily by reason and faith.

Maurer says that the Latin Averroists:

... claimed allegiance to the Catholic faith, and there is no evidence to doubt their sincerity in this regard. Whenever they taught a doctrine contradicting a tenet of their religion, they were careful not to propose it as true but simply as the conclusion of reason and of philosophy. To their opponents this was tantamount to teaching a double truth, one valid for philosophy and another for religion, and in contradiction to each other.

Maurer emphatically states that the Latin Averroists did not believe anything so preposterous but other scholars suggest, as intimated above, that Latin Averroists did not themselves fully understand where their reasoning must inevitably lead: reason and religion are incompatible.

Christian thinkers were appalled, to understate the case. On the one hand, conservative thinkers, such as the Franciscan John Peckham, thought that all human activity should offer greater glory to God. Natural reason, in whatever form, e.g., philosophy, must serve theology. Indeed, Peckham's ally, the great Franciscan, Bonaventure, who championed the conservative position at

Lyons, wrote a little tome on the subject, *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam* (On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology). This group distrusted the human activity of reasoning and saw little value in reason apart from its being a servant of faith. Reason must serve faith.

Other Christians were not as mistrustful of philosophy and the capability of reason. Thomas Aquinas, similar to and schooled by Albertus Magnus, sought to show that Christian and Aristotelian teachings were not antithetical. For Thomas, natural knowledge of the world, gained from empirical evidence and the use of reason, did not conflict with knowledge based in faith. Truth gained from reason, and truth gained from revelation owe their origin to the same source: God, source of revealed truths, is the Creator of the natural world. In short, reason and revelation lead to the same place. Not only can they exist independently, they must also exist without conflict — at least if reason is employed correctly.

Which position should the University of Paris adopt with regard to the curriculum? Allow reason though it might be contrary to religion? Restrict reason on behalf of religion? Act as though reason and religion may be harmonious? The Council of Lyons was convened to decide the questions. Before representatives met that June of 1274, Thomas Aquinas died in March. His death did not deter the two Christian camps from thumping Siger de Brabant's position. Thomas's death, however, meant he was not present to champion his position and ultimately played a role in the outcome. Bonaventure's position won the battle.

The culminating event for the curriculum war occurred in 1277: the impetuous Bishop Etienne Tempier issued a condemnation of 219 propositions. Most of the propositions derived from the Latin Averroist school of thought, though many propositions — the exact number depends on whether a Franciscan or Dominican does the counting — came from the pen of Thomas Aquinas.

Bonaventure did not live to see his position triumph. He died during the Council of Lyons and to this day historians speculate that he may have been poisoned. While it is worth noting that modern curriculum wars pale in comparison to the suspected bloodletting in Lyons, it is more worth noting that Bonaventure's victory lasted mere decades. In April 1323, Pope John XXII canonized Thomas Aquinas, two years before the Condemnation of 1277 was itself annulled. Since then, reason, not as opposed to revelation and especially in the form of the *liberales artes*, had a place at the table in the West. For centuries, we have thought that secular reasoning is not antagonistic to religion and revealed truth.

What does the 13th century teach? The history of the West suggests hope for the Middle East, even if a hope dependent upon leaders in the Islamic

world patiently, contemplatively, and peacefully examining the possibility that reason and revelation can coexist. The 13th century also teaches that religion, specifically Catholicism in the person of Thomas Aquinas, is worth celebrating. I will celebrate on January 28, St. Thomas's feast day.

Our world is better for his intellectual courage and civilized engagement with ideas.

Thomas was the one who prepared Europe for the Enlightenment. His work allowed human reason to engage the world in a meaningful manner. It is not that faith and revelation count for nothing, but that human capacity for thought can count for something, too.

And that is a happy thought. Ω

“History does not entrust the care of freedom to the weak or timid.”
—Dwight D. Eisenhower

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