

The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition

In one way the Franciscan intellectual tradition began in the late 1230s. The Franciscans first gathered in 1209, in the Umbrian commune of Assisi. They spread rapidly and were in Paris by the early 1220s, on the outskirts of the city. From there they soon moved into the city, close to where the learning was going on. A well-known and ecclesiastically busy English churchman and theologian in Paris, Alexander of Hales, started teaching in the Franciscan house in Paris and ended up becoming a friar himself. That was in 1236. Alexander, in his early 50s, was a *magister regens*. A professor with tenure, let us say. He held onto the position as a friar and, as the rules allowed, passed his chair to a fellow friar. So the Franciscans ended up with a chair of theology of their own. Out of the small group of scholars around Alexander came a *Summa theologica*, important in Franciscan study, but just what part Alexander authored, what part John of La Rochelle authored, and what came from other colleagues is a moot question.

One of Alexander's early students was Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. He had high regard for Alexander, calling him his *magister et pater*. He studied under him and in 1243 became a friar himself. Alexander and John both died in 1245. Bonaventure continued his studies under Odo Rigaldi and William of Meliton. He did his exposition on the Sentences of Peter Lombard between 1250 and 1252 and served as regent master from 1254 to 1257. In 1257 he became minister to all his brothers, that is, general minister of the order. Bonaventure made Paris his headquarters and continued mixing into university life with sermons, lectures, and such influential works as his *Collationes in Hexaemeron*. In these lectures he addressed the pressing intellectual questions of the day, such as the influence of Aristotle and of Joachim of Fiore. Under Bonaventure's direction the order's constitutions were redone in 1260. The constitutions favored study and imposed on students and teachers alike fidelity to the Franciscan line. And so we have the origins of one intellectual tradition in the order.

Outstanding in the tradition is Duns Scotus, who died young in 1308, at forty-two. Scotus had a gift for completing and synthesizing what had preceded him in the Franciscan school, and had he had a few more years might have gotten to a synthesis similar to that of Thomas Aquinas. He left behind various versions of his commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, however, and other studies as well. Among Franciscans, those who favor spiritual theology will turn to Bonaventure, whereas those who tend to speculative theology look to Scotus. Then there is William of Ockham (1285-1347), who came out of the philosophical theologies of England in the 1320s and 1330s. The Franciscan Gedeon Gál directed the critical edition of Ockham's philosophical and theological writings, from the middle 1960s to the late 1980s, at The Franciscan Institute, over in the southwestern corner of the state. Though Ockham's editor, Gál himself said his mind took to the inventive reflections of Scotus rather than to the merciless rationality of Ockham.

As the Middle Ages came to an end, Scotus studies flourished in Spain, as did study of Thomas Aquinas. In the early 1500s the Observant convents of Spain (the Observants were reformed Franciscans) began to empty, as the young brothers set out for America. They brought their learning with them. A good number of universities soon arose in Spanish America. The poor Franciscans did not have the funds to study. On invitation, they assumed responsibility for what was called the Chair of Scotus at the universities, which amounted to departments of philosophy and theology. In return they had free admission to the university and to its graduate recognition.

There have been several efforts to give the writings of Duns Scotus a critical edition. It happened in the seventeenth century (Wadding), an edition redone in the nineteenth century (Vivés). A more encompassing edition has been underway now since the 1930s. Bonaventure's writings were edited at the end of the nineteenth and in the early years of the twentieth century. In the trend of the times, at the end of the nineteenth century, the Franciscans began to organize study and scholarship with a university in

Rome and a center of research near Florence. The result has been a steady stream of editions and studies in the tradition begun around Alexander of Hales.

There is another intellectual tradition among Franciscans and it begins in the days and with the support of Francis of Assisi. The initial group of brothers put together a text of common intent in 1209. They developed it in the following years, according to their need for self-correction and theoretical justification. We do not have the text of 1209, but we know the form it reached in 1221. The text contains two passages that required both learning as well as the adaptation of theory to the brothers' action. One concerns the right of needy people to food and shelter, the other declares the commitment of the brotherhood to distributive justice. Along with this text Francis and his brothers began producing as well a series of admonitions in support of their line of action. One admonition defines the role of learning in their life. Their line of action, and study in its support, began losing force as more and more clerics entered and the democratic brotherhood turned into a hierarchical order. This resulted in a turbulence among the brothers, who in principle loved one another, that has continued down to our day.

At the same time as Franciscan scholasticism continued in the order, the development of historical studies and their methods in the nineteenth century did not ignore the Franciscans and Francis of Assisi in particular. And so we arrive at the year 1893, when Paul Sabatier published his *Vie de S. François*. The book had much to recommend it: a serious use of the sources, a pleasing use of the pen, and a capacity to speak to Christians who did not like the church. Or who found the institution too heavy and obtuse, whereas they loved the free religious spirit of Francis of Assisi. Sabatier's *Vie* stimulated polemical discussion. It drove both those who agreed and disagreed to disturb the dust of archives in search of forgotten manuscripts. Sabatier drove a wedge between an ethereal Francis and his too earthy brothers. Many medievalists follow him, for they want Francis of Assisi without the brotherhood.

Within the historical study of Francis and his brothers a few German Franciscans began looking more closely at the first texts produced by the friars. They called these

texts “the writings of Francis of Assisi,” although the writings arose first of all out of the discussions of the brothers about their way of life. Initially, in the fervor of research and publication around 1900, the writings were considered too slender a collection to have much historical weight. However, in 1949, one German Franciscan, Kajetan Esser, published a book on one brief piece: Francis’ parting words to his brothers. On that example, given the involvement of the material in the lives of the brothers, it became clear just how much could be drawn from the texts. This is above all the case with the way of life initially written by the brothers and then developed over the following years. The writings of Clare of Assisi occupy a special place in this historical material. Since then the early writings have become the lingua franca of Franciscans in search of clarity about the Franciscan way of life today.

It is understandable that this intellectual tradition among Franciscans latches onto early attempts to speak to Franciscan life, such as the spiritual and ascetical treatises of Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. Among them Bonaventure’s life of Francis plays a special role. Franciscans have difficulty reading such pieces in historical context. They tend to take everything as instructional or inspirational, instead of trying to figure out what is going on. Seldom, for example, will anyone refer to the Joachimitic structure of Bonaventure’s life of Francis. And they are just beginning to wake up to the socially critical dimension of the early Franciscan writings.

Under the heading of discourse on Franciscan life, one late thirteenth Franciscan theologian has begun drawing more appreciative attention than he enjoyed in years and centuries past. Brother Peter of John, in Latin Petrus Ioannis Olivi, from southern France, ended up theologizing for Franciscan life rather than for the business of learning in Paris. He studied Scripture above all, for he wanted to fix the present moment in history and foresee the coming struggles; then he could explain the role of Franciscan action in those struggles. Brother Peter of John is regularly mentioned in surveys of Franciscan theology. Historians fit him into the current that passed from Bonaventure to Scotus. And, in truth, given that he was a *lector ordinis*, one who taught in the schools at the local level, he did produce texts that contributed to the Franciscan school. Scotus refers to him with respect,

although not by name, seeing as it was forbidden to read him. However, the core of his production has to do with questions that relate to the Franciscan way, both that of religious as well as the ways of secular Franciscans. Before Brother Peter of John enters into the intellectual tradition more interested in Franciscan life than with professional theology, it is necessary: first to clear his name as a Franciscan fanatic; second to edit his writings; and finally to get some of them into modern translations. The more the second point has progressed in recent decades, the less has the first point become necessary. It's the third that's the problem.

Whereas the intellectual tradition that begins around Alexander of Hales belongs to higher culture and enjoys a sure place in society, the intellectual tradition that arose within the first brotherhood belongs to the daily piety of Franciscan life. As a scholar who has to do with both traditions, I think we Franciscans have to learn to read the early writings for their story. The story has to do with freeing labor, which is the problem and the challenge we face today. I have a day-long program this coming Saturday in Montreal, for Franciscans both religious and lay, where I argue the case. I expect a good turnout. It's on the tradition, it's on notre héritage.

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