

BOOK REVIEWS

God's Troubadour and the Dumb Ox

PREPARATION for the spiritual needs of people living in the modern era began seven centuries before Max Heindel published *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception*. In the thirteenth century, a high spiritual teacher, having the symbolical name Christian Rosenkreutz, appeared in Europe to found “the mysterious Order of Rosicrucians with the object of throwing occult light upon the misunderstood Christian religion.” The Order’s eponymous founder sought to unify the two approaches to life that comprise the faith-reason, subjective-objective polarity, or, to use Heindel’s terms, the mystic and occult paths.

In *Ancient and Modern Initiation*, Heindel writes that “the Christian Mystic form of Initiation differs radically from the Rosicrucian method, which aims to bring the candidate to compassion through knowledge.” While the Rosicrucian Order is a school of occultism (“It is necessary to be an occultist to...study...the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.” 1Q&A, p. 359), it seeks to subsume the Christian mystic approach and, through the fullest employment of high reason, to promote the development of the fully integrated spiritual person, whose love and rational natures are fused and finely balanced.

Salient representatives of the two streams of Western spiritual practice, whose synthesis was personified in Christian Rosenkreutz, also lived in the thirteenth century—the mystic, St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), progenitor of the Franciscan Order, and the Dominican friar, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).

Gilbert Keith Chesterton has written memorable accounts of the life and character of both men, which now appear in one volume, with introductions, published in 2000 by Ignatius Press. While

some of the *Rays* readers may have read about both friars, Chesterton’s viewpoint is, as always, utterly unique, some might say idiosyncratic. His style abounds in tortuous paradoxes, flashes of poetry, colorful phraseology, a rollicking amplitude of vision, and a piquant garnishing of friendly irony.

In many ways Francis and Thomas were opposites, temperamentally and spiritually. Both were fools for God, because both were humble, Francis sometimes outrageously so. He was a lover of poverty. He died prostrate, naked, arms outstretched even as his crucified Lord, his body wasted by joyously embraced ascetic habits. He felt ever unworthy to bear a bodily suffering that was never enough to appease his emulation of Christ Jesus: “He wandered about the valleys of the world looking for the hill that has the outline of a skull.” On one hill (Mt. Arno) he received the stigmata, a by-product, as it were, of his zeal for transcendence and union with his God.

There was an antic and an anarchic quality to Francis. He was an extremist. He love God extravagantly. The world judged his actions bizarre, radically impractical, even life-threatening. But which life? Surely not the life of the Spirit. What profits saving the physical life if one loses one’s soul? Francis was God’s lily in the field. His spirit was arrayed in a glory that was like the irresistible invitation of sunrise: Come join me in the praise of God. It is ironic that this mystic’s mystic (from the Greek *myein*, to keep the lips or eyes closed—to see the inner or invisible worlds), who gazed into the abyss of divinity and saw God’s creatures as his younger brothers and sisters, had poker sticks stuck into his eyes to remedy his impending blindness. He greeted the red-hot brand in these words: “Brother fire, God made you beautiful and strong and useful; I pray you be courteous with me.”

Remember this the next time you visit the dentist! If anything, Francis saw more clearly, dim as the outer world had become. One other point. St Francis was a mystic, but not an obscurantist. “[H]e believed in mysticism and not in mystification. As a mystic he was the mortal enemy of all those mystics who melt away the edges of things and dissolve an entity into its environment.”

Thomas, called the “dumb ox” because he had a hulking frame and spoke little and slowly as a youth, was also a fool for God because he cared nought for his personal self and with his whole impersonal mind sought God’s presence in concrete creation and in the very process of thinking itself. Thomas was an incarnationist: Christ lived in Jesus and He lives in the Earth. God is closer than hands and feet. The modern scientific outlook speaks in Thomas’ words: “Everything that is in the intellect has been in the senses.” What can one refer to that someone’s eyes have not seen or someone’s ears have not heard, including God? Thomas’ approach is at the very opposite end of inquiry from that of the mystic, wherein the mind is lit entirely from within. Thomas insisted that the mind is lit by the five windows of the senses. The light without shines on and finds its conceptual counterpart in the light within. They are mates, brother and sister. By studying men Thomas arrives at the knowledge of man. By studying discrete particulars, he induces general truths.

Even though he had a “towering ambition to take the lowest place, Thomas’ love of truth overcame his humility.” It spoke boldly, with the authority of a monarch, when his personal self would have squirmed to utter a syllable and preferred sequestered anonymity. But that meekness deferred to the God-infused truth that reason illumined in his objective mind. Thomas was born in one of Italy’s most notable families. Though a cousin to Frederick II, the Holy Roman Emperor, he did not mine that patrician ore. A higher authority, and a higher obedience, called him.

“The mystic is usually devoid of intellectual knowledge,” and Francis had a nearly reckless attitude about rejecting books and scholarship. After all, for one who lives in the God-abiding moment, what is the need for a book about

divinity when It is all around and in one! Thomas, on the other hand, wrote scores of books, brilliantly ordered, impeccably reasoned, difficult at times, but due to the inherent depth of the ideas considered, not for lack of clarity of thought or verbal transparency. Notwithstanding, Thomas knew the limits of the mind and understood that the highest truths come by revelation—both first-hand and from seers. His work was a humanizing of divinity through the right use of mind, which honored objective facts because, reasonably encountered, the facts and the encountering mind together affirm the ubiquitous presence of God’s Intelligence and very Being. Thomas expected this affirmation for he knew that nothing discovered in nature can ultimately contradict faith. Both are sourced and substantiated by the same Creator.

Thomas was one of the great liberators of the human intellect precisely because he knew the mind is not captive to material creation. As Chesterton observes, Aquinas “reconciled religion with reason.” Reason has “a divine right to feed upon facts.”

Etienne Gilson, perhaps the 20th century’s foremost Thomist, writes of Chesterton’s study, “I consider it being, without possible comparison, the best book ever written on St. Thomas.”

Francis praised God in a life of devotion and action, Thomas in virile, affirmative mental deed. Francis effused and sang God. Of Thomas, Chesterton writes, “Perhaps no other man ever came so near to calling the Creator by His own name, which can only be written I Am.” The logical statements of Thomas of Aquino may not read like songs, but their considered effect will elevate the soul more dependably than a mere emotional ejaculation.

Toward the end of his life, reportedly while celebrating Mass, Thomas had a vision, after which he ceased his writing, with the explanation: “I can write no more. I have seen things which make all my writings like straw.” Not that Thomas ceased to be logical, for no one more than he knew that reason’s achievements are permanent. And, as Max Heindel, mystic and occultist, reminds us: “logic is the safest and surest guide in any world.” □

—C.W.