

Unreliable Tools

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Postmodernism can apparently mean a number of quite different things. Its practitioners seem to lose not a wink of sleep over the mutual incompatibility of certain projects that take shelter under its roof. Deconstruction, for example, has as its bedfellow the revisionism or constructive postmodernism that often appears in the SUNY series edited by D. R. Griffin. This is possible because its unity seems founded on one basic rejection rather than on a common constituent—rejection of the Enlightenment conception of reason—if not completely, at least in some significant part. In this respect it is a movement like existentialism. Few among those who claimed that mantle agreed on much by way of common doctrines. It was rather a fundamental rejection, the repudiation of essence as a mere instrument of the will to power, that proved enough to galvanize an entire generation of thinkers, and to reach for roots in Kierkegaard.

But there certainly were Christian existentialists—Marcel, of course, and perhaps Berdyaev and Dostoevsky. Can there not be Christian postmodernists? I suspect that there can. My worry is that their thinking will almost necessarily fade off into fideism, and thereby they hazard the same risks fideists always face, not only for themselves but culturally for the Christian body of which they are members. The historical reality of Christianity in culture is the reality of a religion that is logocentric at its very heart. I do not mean that by some accident of its early history it became inextricably entwined with Hellenism, but that Logos is the very name for the second person of the Trinity, and that this has implications for the nature of human thinking.¹ It was Word who became flesh and proclaimed a unique saving truth. Over on the far flank there is the opposite danger of making this religion, in the witness that it bears

¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has a fine meditation on this point in *A Turning Point for Europe? The Church in the Modern World - Assessment and Forecast* [1991], trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), esp. 130-150.

to this Word and in its participation in this saving truth, ultimately to be a form of gnosticism. For the gnostic of any generation, it is mere knowledge of this secret truth that saves. But, on the contrary, orthodox Christian belief has always been that salvation comes not merely from knowledge but from faith in the Word who became flesh and transforms human life through and through. So, although it is not knowledge that saves, the Christian religion is marked by a truth-claim in the strongest possible sense, and this facet of the historical reality of Christianity inescapably entails doing theology.

With theology comes all the rationality and logic that any "-ology" implies. Can't we construct an apologetics specially geared for postmodern times that would escape logocentrism? One that would use distinctively postmodern tools against the powerful cultural forces that presently claim them exclusively?² As precedent for trying to use some new movement for religious ends, there is certainly the venerable tradition of adopting certain aspects of Hellenism for the purposes of evangelization, and, later, of appropriating the pagan Aristotle, correcting him at a few crucial junctures, and then building with his help a theological explanation of the universe comparable to the cathedrals being erected by the same age. If Rome could employ Athens in the service of Jerusalem, why not attempt a postmodern religious apologetics for a postmodern world? Why not? Need we stay silent, or as good as silent, by insisting on logocentrism, when nobody today is willing to listen to that anymore?

What might it mean? To adopt as our own the recent critiques of Enlightenment rationality does make some sense and might be an attractive strategy. There is no shortage of motives to be suspicious of in our opponents, so our own hermeneutics of suspicion could easily be a sharp sword in our own hands. In fact, there have been attempts to see philosophy not as a body of positive knowledge but as simply a study of the ideologies of an age. One Jesuit philosophy center in Europe took as its plan a concentration on the three masters of suspicion: Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, in the hope that thorough acquaintance with these figures would give the seminarians the edge they needed for critical analysis as they engaged in works of social concern out of their religious faith. The experiment has been a sad failure. Most lost their faith and were swallowed up by the culture they set out to critique. Well-intentioned as were the instructors, administrators and students, their faith was outflanked by forces too powerful for the tools they had been given.

In a sphere closer to home, we have the problem of finding methods for

² Merold Westphal has had tremendous success with this strategy in various works, including his book *Suspicion and Faith: the Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1993).

religious catechesis currently prevalent in America. Frequently there is much well-intentioned emphasis on personal experience, chaperoned by such fine postmodern values as the sincerity of one's motives and channelled into the pedagogy of story-telling. This is not as contentiously postmodern as the cultivation of a hermeneutics of suspicion, but it seems to me to be the practical pedagogical application of the salient point of postmodernism—the rejection of reason and proof—and it generally works in practice by casting suspicion on doctrine and Church teaching as old-fashioned and dull, cold and insincere, without raising for reasonable consideration the historical matrix in which these theological solutions were worked out, or the importance of the philosophical distinctions needed to preserve biblical faith when biblical words were being twisted by opposing parties for their own ends, even at the risk of losing some crucial aspect of Christian faith. The doctrine of the two natures in Christ, for instance, was articulated in philosophical and not biblical categories so as to preserve biblical faith: we need to hold both the equality of the second member of the Trinity with the first (He couldn't save us unless He truly is God), and at the same time Christ's full humanity and our need deliberately and vigorously to imitate Him (He is the model and pattern for our lives; what He did not assume about our nature He did not heal).³

The desirability of having a postmodern strategy in apologetics is clear, and surely sincerity will be more attractive than suspicion. Perhaps we could just trust more to approaches we once scorned as fideist so as to give the young true opinions, letting the confidence and sincerity of believers' testimonies suffice. The telling of stories, after all, does tend to bring people to let their defenses down, and thus give room for the story to break in upon the mind: to challenge, to console, to convict, to convince.

I remain unconvinced that the tools of postmodern thought are sufficiently reliable for the project at hand. Any of these options might be tactically useful on some occasion, but good tactics do not yet a strategy make. The intellectual component of a religious renewal of culture needs a strategy, I contend, that is twofold: it must cultivate reverence for the Transcendent by articulate praise and by prayerful silence; but it must also educate, it must provide an enculturation into the faith by reasonable words. The cacophony of postmodern noise seems to me to miss the mark on both counts.

Wouldn't a strategy that insists on argumentation be saying, in effect, "put up your dukes"? Yes, it would. But in order to let in the light of contemplation,

³ This is, of course, the project of St. Irenaeus of Lyons. A contemporary attempt to work this out for personal and cultural development according to the pattern of Christ is that offered by Paul M. Quay, S.J. in *The Mystery Hidden for Ages in God* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

it may first be necessary to knock down some of the most cherished defenses on the other side. Even if you cannot at first persuade, you may need the force of sheer reason to dis-convince, and that not by dirty tricks which only bring resentment. All the better if classical metaphysics can serve its traditional function of enculturating the young into the foundations for the values of genuine humanism. But at the very least we need to expose the debased forms of reasoning popular today, as for instance found in the claim that everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion, when this claim is really but a way to outlaw the holding of any opinion as cogent and compelling to the intellect. Or, to consider one of the preferred postmodern tools, the admission that our truths are tribal. The claim that some culturally relative tradition is legitimate for us because it is one of our tribe's truths is to go back to using the proverbial caveman's club—powerful at short range, but not very subtle.

My thesis is that espousal of postmodernism will make for bad strategy at any level of our religious enterprise. Its protest against Enlightenment reason does strike a chord in us because it is protesting something worth protesting, the aridity of rationalism. But for believers to embrace its repudiation of reason gone stale will only deepen the crisis, for the problem is not with reason, but with the Enlightenment's desiccated understanding of reason. The natural religion of Archdeacon Paley and the theodicy of Leibniz left no place for faith as a form of knowledge, so the successors to the Enlightenment concluded that faith must mean a leap into the dark. In fact, I suspect that that is precisely the fallacy of the Enlightenment's attempts at natural theology. As Christopher Dawson diagnosed the problem, those thinkers did not grasp that the difference between the discursive reason and the intuition of the contemplative is not the same as the difference between the natural and the supernatural, between reason and faith. These are simply different levels of consciousness, but are equally parts of human nature.⁴ Or, as John Smith puts it in "Prospects for Natural Theology,"⁵ there is a genuine function for reason within the ambit of faith: the contribution it makes is to help show religious beliefs to be intelligible and coherent even where it cannot demonstrate them the way a science would attempt to do so. By contrast, the Enlightenment identification of human nature exclusively with its discursive rational aspects confuses and prejudices the whole approach to religion as simply irrational.

Religion begins in the depths of the soul—not by the mere vitality of our psychic projections, but contemplatively, by our awe at the intuition of being. So far as I can tell, this is really the forcefulness of what are called the arguments

⁴ Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1949), 33-34.

⁵ John Smith, "Prospects for Natural Theology" in *The Monist* 75/3 (1992), 406-420.

from design. They do not ever amount to a proof of the existence of God the way deists would like, for they never get us to an objective knowledge of the designer—God always exceeds our categories. But they stir in the soul a sense of the direction in which the designer must be.

Rightly to appreciate the relation of religion and reason, we actually need a stronger and richer sense of the levels of reason than the Enlightenment avers, and *a fortiori* than postmodernism commands. The conception of reason we need will be one far more alert both to intuition and to demonstration. Here I need to depart from Smith, who curiously seems to think that Aquinas drew a razor-sharp line between the spheres of faith and reason and then set out on the project of an elaborate natural theology. Rather than such a demarcation-line, what Aquinas offers is better seen as a pair of overlapping circles (the *preambula fidei*) where the overlap names a limited group of truth-claims demonstrable by reason but equally well accessible by faith. The sphere of claims where truth is known only on the basis of faith still involves reason in the sense Smith urges: reason is at work there to reflect on the meaning of the claim and to bring out the intelligibility and coherence, but trust and belief in the revealer and in the content of the faith is authoritative here. Human reason, however, does have a sphere where it can operate independently by its own lights. Aquinas' picture is not the Augustinian map Smith seems to approve.⁶ Rather, the powers of cognition present in the human knower, when developed and trained in themselves and alerted to the cognitive traditions of human experience passed from one generation to the next, can know all sorts of things (e.g., reasoning from effect to cause) without recourse to divine illumination.⁷ The Thomistic picture seems to me to try to avoid both the extremes of fideism and rationalism by carrying a place for reason within faith and for reason operating under its own God-given natural powers. To do so requires a stronger theory of knowledge than Augustinian illumination but not the hubristic elimination of faith as a genuine source of some knowledge.

This return to the Thomistic vision of overlapping spheres is not, I maintain, to hide our heads in the sands of the past. In fact, in the ages of faith a purely natural theology had no separate existence in the sociology of knowledge.⁸ Except to professional theologians, it had no independent significance but was simply a part of the common Christian theology—witness the way in which

⁶ E.g., He makes the rather strong claim: "'in Thy light shall we see light'—all understanding requires this light," 414.

⁷ W. Norris Clarke, S.J., provides an excellent example of how to do this in "Is a Natural Theology Still Viable Today?" in *Prospects for Natural Theology*, ed. E. Long (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 151-182.

⁸ Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 7.

one of the high points of philosophical autonomy, Anselm's ontological argument, is simply part of the movement of faith seeking understanding. Bonaventure uses the same type of argument, but he cannot even imagine philosophy without Christ at the center. While the highly intellectualist thought of Aquinas puts the proofs at the very start of the *Summa*, it would be a fundamental misunderstanding to take them as the heart of his theological program, a misunderstanding often reflected today in the utter mystification of students presented with only this snippet of Aquinas. They generally do not find it compelling, and it only leaves a distaste, while students given a far larger portion of Thomas and a more integrated picture of reason and faith as complementary sources of knowledge find far more satisfaction in the experience and can better discern the different types of challenge to their religion from the secular world, having been practiced in the discernment of various sources of truth-claims and various patterns of explanation and defense.

The point is that such rudimentary knowledge of God as natural theology can give assumes far more importance in an era like ours not possessed of religious unity and not as culturally soaked in the living habits of religion as the ages of faith were. Historically, natural theology went hand in hand with Western humanism, the humanism of Erasmus and More and the Christian Platonists, as a way to appreciate the good of nature and human dignity. The basically rational order of the world was justified for them only by being seen as the work of divine reason, as the product of divine artistry. It persevered in importance during the age of religious division as "a certain and universal foundation of religious truth in a world where everything was disputed,"⁹ for the more completely new science took hold, the more its adherents needed the idea of God as the source and principle of intelligibility.

If pre-moderns held that without God, there would be no knowledge, the postmoderns seem to say that we have no God and no knowledge. In resisting the epistemological despair of postmodernity, what we need is not so much to defend modernity—whose chief *animus*, after all, was attack upon religion as irrational—but a defense of reason as larger than the limits within which modernity set to confine it. This, I think, was Maritain's point in *Antimoderne*, when he wrote:

Reason is the faculty of the real, or more correctly, the faculty by which our spirit becomes adequate to the real, and by which our spirit knows, no doubt analogically and very distantly but truthfully, the reality of realities, God. Reason is made for truth, made to possess it.¹⁰

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ My translation of Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne*, Nouvelle edition revue et augmentée

The distinction he proceeds to make between reason and intellect, not as two different faculties, but two different aspects or modes of operation of one and the same faculty, is intended to contrast with the general tendency in modern philosophy from Descartes forward to treat reason as purely discursive and thus doomed to the critical project whose emptiness will bring epistemological despair.¹¹ By contrast, he offers a picture of faith as able to complete and perfect reason, much as grace completes and perfects nature. Faith, he explains, is a full and voluntary adhesion of intelligence to the truths revealed by God.¹² What faith provides has intelligibility to our minds by reason of its author, the source of all intelligibility, even if it goes beyond what a given person could figure out by using unaided rational powers at the disposal of nature. To make such a distinction between reason and intellect is to avoid the Cartesian reduction of all cognitive activity to the domain of a pure, impersonal, autonomous and self-sufficient reason able unaided to grasp with perfect transparency all that is real and worth knowing.

Not all postmodern thinkers seek to make the same radical denial of the possibility of objective truth, but the apparently tempered claims of the more moderate voices risk the same fate as the radical fringe to the extent that they abandon the claim of human reason to gain some real purchase on the causal structures of reality. If they claim that all access to objective truth is blocked in principle, their argument will be self-destructive by being internally contradictory, and little more will need to be said beyond reminding them of the performative self-contradiction involved in their claim to inform us of that truth.¹³ But the voices which only claim that we have no rational access to significant truths about the divine and insist that all religious truths are entirely the product of faith risk missing what we can know, given our natural drive to know and our innate cognitive structures. To correct the rationalist thesis that only what we humans ourselves can analyze and synthesize is real and knowable does not require abandoning the legitimate claims of reason to know some things beyond the immediately visible or sensible through the principle of causality. What it does require is a chastened habit of reasonable affirmations made by responsible thinking about the meaning latent in the data we receive and responsible

(Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1922), 29: "La Raison est la faculté par laquelle notre esprit devient adéquat au réel, et par laquelle nous connaissons, d'une manière analogique sans doute et très lointaine, mais véridique, la réalité des réalités, Dieu. La Raison est faite pour la vérité, pour posséder l'être."

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne*, 56.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³ This point has been well-worked out by James Marsh in "Postmodernism: A Lonerganian Retrieval and Critique" in *The International Philosophical Quarterly* 35/2 (1995), 159-173.

judgment grounded on the evidence available to the inquirer. However limited or incomplete our cognitive claims have to remain, there is no reason to suppose that they open on to nothing or are directed only inwardly toward the knower rather than outwardly toward reality. Preserving this confidence will not be helped by unreliable tools.