



1958

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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "3. Bonaventura and Medieval Mysticism. Pt. IV: The Medieval Ferment." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 10-16.

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3. Bonaventura and Medieval Mysticism

Abstract

Throughout the whole history of religious experience there have been two supplementary emphases, the rational and the non-rational, which have vied with each other for men's allegiance. The Thomistic synthesis, with its stress on reason and how reason could prove the existence of God, was thought by many, including St. Bonaventura (1221-1274), to press too far the rational side of religion and thus to detract from the other side, which emphasizes the free gift of faith, intuitive insight, and mystical experience. This rational emphasis, thought Bonaventura, could lead to intellectual pride and arrogance. It could also lead to a minimizing of that aspect of God which his Augustinian and Neoplatonic leanings led him to stress: the absolute sovereignty of God. [excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, St. Bonaventura, Medieval Era, Christianity, supernatural

Disciplines

European History | History | History of Christianity | History of Religion | Medieval History | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section IV: The Medieval Ferment](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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3. Bonaventura and Medieval Mysticism

Throughout the whole history of religious experience there have been two supplementary emphases, the rational and the non-rational, which have vied with each other for men's allegiance. The Thomistic synthesis, with its stress on reason and how reason could prove the existence of God, was thought by many, including St. Bonaventura (1221-1274), to press too far the rational side of religion and thus to detract from the other side, which emphasizes the free gift of faith, intuitive insight, and mystical experience. [This rational emphasis, thought Bonaventura, could lead to intellectual pride and arrogance. It could also lead to a minimizing of that aspect of God which his Augustinian and Neoplatonic leanings led him to stress: the absolute sovereignty of God.]

There was another problem, also a perennial one in the history of religion. [This was the question of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural.] Early Christianity, as we have seen, had insisted that these two aspects of religion were uniquely united within the person of Jesus Christ. [During the medieval period God's supernatural and transcendent aspect had been stressed more often than His natural and immanent aspect.] [When pushed to the extreme, this latter emphasis tended to relate God so closely to the world of nature as to identify the two -- a position called pantheism.] For example, Aristotle's insistence on the identity of man's active reason with the divine mind could, when the divine mind was also the Creator, lead to an identity of man's mind with the mind of God. This possibility was uniquely present in a religion such as Christianity which held that the world had been created out of nothing by a good God. The mystical experience which insisted on one's transcending the natural world could be, and was, viewed as a means of escaping such pantheistic tendencies, despite the fact that it was not entirely immune from them.

[Mysticism is defined in the Western World as the belief that the knowledge of God can be gained by direct experience of Him through something like insight or intuition raised to its highest pitch.] It is essentially a means of communication, contrasting with the mysticism of the Orient and Plotinus which stresses one's identification with the deity. In the early Church mysticism readily focused on the person of Christ, the supreme religious experience being intimate personal relationship with Him. This attitude was strengthened by the Platonic and Neoplatonic insistence on the need for something in addition to human reason. [Bonaventura saw mysticism as the highest experience of which man, with the help of God, was capable, and as a necessary corrective to the rationalistic and pantheistic tendencies of his own time. Because of the high position which he gave to mystical experience he was called the Seraphic Doctor.]

Pantheism - everything is God, and God is in everything.

Bonaventura, whose original name was John of Fidenza, was born in Italy. He became a Franciscan, and both studied and taught at Paris when that university was at the height of its eminence. Because of the conflict between those who did and those who did not want the mendicants to teach, it was only the intervention of the pope himself which finally enabled him to receive the degree of doctor. On the very same day another friar, a Dominican, was also granted his degree as a result of the same intervention -- Thomas Aquinas. About the same time Bonaventura was called upon to head the Franciscan Order (1257), and to try to resolve the clash between the Spirituals and Conventuals. He was made a bishop and eventually a cardinal. He died at the Council of Lyons, the same council to which Thomas Aquinas was journeying when he died.

[The mysticism of Francis and Bonaventura could be pointed upward to God as well as outward toward man and nature. Few men were able to maintain the balance between God and this world that Francis had established. When mysticism was pointed up, it was more in line with the thought of the times, and more amenable to what the Church considered orthodox. The whole universe could be viewed as a series of stages on the upward path to God. And, because of the intimate connection between God and nature, almost any aspect of nature, as we have seen in Francis' "Canticle to the Sun," could be used as symbolically or analogically representing God. This was all the more necessary because of the fact that the supreme mystical experience was an indescribable or ineffable one. Of supreme importance within nature was the human soul and, while later and more scientifically minded Franciscans focused their attention on physical nature, the earlier and more religiously minded focused theirs on spiritual nature. There was, however, always the danger that the mystic might decide that this path could be followed without the help of the Church. Bonaventura, like Thomas, was thoroughly orthodox at this point. Recognizing man's sinfulness, he was always willing to be corrected by the pope at points where he might be incorrect or unorthodox. It is for this reason that he must be viewed as adding to the variety of the High Middle Ages rather than to the ferment. But later mystics were not always so amenable to ecclesiastical discipline. Some of them provide one of the springs from which religious revolt issued in the sixteenth century.]

If we are to try to catch the variety of the Middle Ages, we must pay attention to the mystics who suggested aspects of man's religious experience which were different from the rational. These are seen in Bonaventura's work: The Journey of the Mind to God (1259), in which he spelled out in prose what Francis had been content to enjoy and express in the experiences of his life.

Leaned toward faith, did not use science.

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