

# MARITAIN AND NEWMAN: THEOLOGY, INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AND HUMAN TRANSCENDENCE IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Brian Hughes

## Maritain: Theology

Maritain maintains a classic, Thomistic understanding of theology. It is “knowledge in the state of science—a knowledge which is both rooted in revealed data and rationally developed, logically and systematically articulated.”<sup>1</sup> “Rooted in faith,” theology is also the “highest wisdom that man can acquire as adapted to the procedures of human reason.”<sup>2</sup> Theology engages subjects that are universal because it is, as Thomas tells us, more speculative than practical.<sup>3</sup> Its speculative and logical features describe a scientific discipline carried out by a believing intellect. But theology is also something more. It is, as Maritain holds, “a *habitus* of wisdom rooted in faith.”<sup>4</sup> For Maritain, *habitus* means an intellectual habit or a virtue, a way of thinking and seeing that can be taught and learned.

It is important to recognize that this last description is different from discrete specialty fields such as patristic pneumatology or medical bioethics or orthodox religious iconography. When Maritain comments on the genre, the classification of Christian theology, which falls within higher education, he does not divide it into what Edward Farley calls the “four-fold” paradigm of theological education: systematic or dogmatic theology, ethics, church history and scripture.<sup>5</sup> Rather, Maritain characterizes theology as a single whole with different aspects,

---

<sup>1</sup> Maritain, *The Education of Man*, eds. Donald and Idella Gallagher (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), p. 78 (cited hereafter as “EM”).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 82 (cited hereafter as “EC”).

<sup>3</sup> EM, p. 78; EC, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Science and Wisdom*, translated by Bernard Wall (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940), p. 113.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), chapter 4 ff.

speculative and practical being the most evident. Theology as a *habitus* develops with the assistance of grace, but builds upon the innate potencies or natural capacities of human intelligence—here, that of the undergraduate student.

Theology does play a crucial role, for Maritain, in undergraduate education. He maintains, for example, that theology is a “keystone of the edifice of learning in a Christian college.”<sup>6</sup> But what does this mean? In part, it means that theology will not be taught as a practical or a professional field of specialization, as something akin to ministerial training. Maritain states, quite ahead of his time, that the teaching of theology be given in a quite different way from that appropriate to religious seminaries and be adapted to the intellectual needs of laymen; its aim should not be to form a priest, a minister, or a rabbi, but to enlighten students of secular matters about the great doctrines and perspectives of theological wisdom. Such teaching would not be concerned with the detailed apparatus of historical authorities, but it would rather lay stress on the intrinsic rational consistency of doctrines and the basic insights on which they depend. It would be free from any preoccupation with merely technical questions or dead quarrels and closely connected with the problems of contemporary science and culture. Studies in comparative religion would be included in it.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, in terms of theological methodology, Maritain seems to describe an incipient correlational method, dialectically relating doctrines of faith to aspects of human culture. Yet, this is not an exclusively professional or graduate level undertaking. One can practice theological reflection and enter into theological discourse on the basis of “common sense and natural intelligence, sharpened by the infused virtue of faith . . . to understand . . . theology intelligently taught.”<sup>8</sup> This description needs to be read carefully. It is not a description of theology as catechesis, if by that term one means religious instruction. Maritain acknowledges the importance of this in

---

<sup>6</sup> *EM*, p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> *EM*, p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> *EM*, p. 139.

spiritual and especially moral life, but it is not what he means by the teaching of theology here.<sup>9</sup> There is a formative role for theology. It is one that is distinct and proper to a liberal arts education. A key purpose of theology—as a formative habit of wisdom concerned with relating the divine to the human—is its contribution to intellectual freedom.

### Intellectual Freedom

An integral aspect of a liberal arts education is the relationship between theology and intellectual freedom. To draw out the connection between theology and intellectual freedom, let us first examine Maritain's understanding of "freedom." In describing the difference between his view of freedom and that of philosophers such as Kant, Maritain prefaces his treatment by noting "the freedom of independence and of exultation . . . the freedom of expansion of the human person."<sup>10</sup> This freedom of independence and exultation is not free will or a freedom of choosing between this or that. Freedom as free choice is real and presupposed by Maritain. Yet free choice and the entire realm of human action primarily belongs to the rational appetite, a significant but secondary focus of university instruction.<sup>11</sup> University education primarily involves human intelligence. The freedom Maritain considers here denotes a deeper, more mysterious aspect of the human being as intellectual. It is about the natural aspirations of spirit that pertain to the infinite striving of human intelligence towards being, towards reality and knowledge. He writes:

The chief aspirations of a person are aspirations to freedom. . . . I mean that freedom which is spontaneity, expansion, or autonomy, and which we have to gain through constant effort and struggle. And what is the more profound and essential form of such a desire? It is the desire for inner and spiritual freedom. In this sense Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle, spoke of the

---

<sup>9</sup> EC, p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> EM, p. 159.

<sup>11</sup> EM, p. 159f.

independence which is granted to men by intellect and wisdom as the perfection of the human being.<sup>12</sup>

The process of liberal education and the *habitus* of theology are precisely ordered to the freeing of the human personality as distinct from one's individuality or material "ego." Maritain holds that "the prime goal of education is the conquest of internal and spiritual freedom to be achieved by the individual person, or, in other words, his liberation through knowledge and wisdom, good will, and love."<sup>13</sup> It is what Newman expresses another way as "the enlargement of mind." This is different from the drive of the ego, our individuality, which Maritain describes as "a narrowness... forever threatened and forever eager to *grasp for itself*."<sup>14</sup> True human personality, the "self," moves outwards, so to speak, while individuality or the ego draws everything inwards.

Maritain characterizes the drive or dynamism of the human mind when it engages in thinking as "a vital energy of spiritual intuition grasping things in their intelligible consistency and universal values."<sup>15</sup> Such vital energy is naturally spontaneous in that it moves of its own accord toward understanding of not simply discrete subjects, but also of what they are, of how they are, and of why things are by virtue of judging according to the evidence. This is growth in personhood. This principle, this movement of vital energy, applies across the spectrum of the humanities which includes, for Maritain, not simply the traditional "liberal arts," (philosophy, theology, history) but also the mechanical and the "hard sciences," such as technology, physics, chemistry, and so on.<sup>16</sup> All of these sciences and disciplines can be known and penetrated for their value as revealing degrees and levels of real things external to the mind. Maritain elaborates:

---

<sup>12</sup> EC, p. 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> EC, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, translated by John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p. 37 (cited hereafter as "PCG").

<sup>15</sup> EM, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> EM, p. 69.

The freeing of the intuitive power is achieved in the soul through the object grasped, the intelligible grasping toward which this power naturally tends. The germ of insight starts within a preconscious intellectual cloud, arising from experience, imagination, and a kind of spiritual feeling, but it is from the outset a tending toward an object to be grasped. And to the extent that this tendency is set free and the intellect becomes accustomed to grasping, seeing, expressing the objects toward which it tends, to that very extent its intuitive power is liberated and strengthened.<sup>17</sup>

The student, however, must possess the proper dispositions in order to free the personality by its contact with such fields and disciplines. Maritain articulates several: a love of truth, a love of goodness and justice, a simplicity and openness concerning existence, "the sense of a job well done" as the outcome of deliberation and responsibility, and finally, a disposition for social and political life.<sup>18</sup> Proper teaching can cultivate dispositions that enhance personal freedom. Although there is no single way to achieve this, Maritain clearly spells out what this type of teaching is not.

Two major threats confront the development of intellectual freedom in a liberal arts education. The first threat is something common, especially to Americans and those in the teaching profession. It is to view one's occupation and its associated tasks as the "supreme end."<sup>19</sup> For Maritain, this is simply a reversal of what the genuine human attitude and disposition should be towards interests, activities, and especially towards the subjects of study. Knowledge approached from a pragmatic or utilitarian view turns realities and our knowledge of them into quantifiable products for consumption. As such, history or philosophy or sociology is not taught and learned as something good to know in and of itself, as something that can occasion spontaneous discrimination and connections of meaning in young intellects. Rather, such discrete subject matters and branches of knowledge are

---

<sup>17</sup> *EC*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> *EC*, pp. 36-8.

<sup>19</sup> *EM*, p. 101.

approached as means to an end: a grade, a diploma, a particular honor, a job. Such an attitude turns subject matters into commodities and actually impedes the personality's liberation. For Maritain, what results from this utilitarian commoditization of knowledge is not education but a technical conditioning. This kind of formation is the assertion of the individual's power, the ego. Students are not taught to really think but are expected to absorb the results and procedures of a science at high, concentrated levels. There is, consequently, no understanding or movement towards integration with other disciplines, with other forms of knowledge. There is little space for a radical receptivity and openness to truth in this view of knowledge and learning. It is precisely such receptivity and openness that Maritain holds as essential. He writes that:

the spiritual activities of the human being are intentional activities; they tend by nature toward an object, an objective aim, which will measure and rule them, not materially and by means of bondage, but spiritually and by means of liberty, for the object of knowledge or of love is internalized by the activity itself of the intelligence and the will, and becomes within them the very fire of their perfect spontaneity. Truth—which does not depend on us but on what is—truth is not a set of ready-made formulas to be passively recorded, so as to have the mind closed and enclosed by them. Truth is an infinite realm—as infinite as being—whose wholeness transcends infinitely our powers of perception, and each fragment of which must be grasped through vital and purified internal activity.<sup>20</sup>

There must exist, in other words, a radically purified intellectual wonder, a freshness, within those studying that does not prearrange results or fit the "truth" to serve lesser motives. The pragmatic commoditization of knowledge and its influence over the learning process erodes the transcendental movement of the mind toward intellectual freedom and truth.

---

<sup>20</sup> EC, p. 11-12.

The other threat to intellectual freedom related to the “absolute primacy of work” is “the disregard for the human value of leisure.”<sup>21</sup> There is little integration in university pedagogy between the “useful activity” of work and the opportunities it affords for “the joy, expansion, and delight of the spirit.”<sup>22</sup> Here, Maritain identifies not simply a correlate to a bad education but also a feature of American culture. It is interesting to note that Maritain’s claims in the late 1950s find support in the research of Boston College sociologist Juliet Schor. In 1991, Schor found that:

[Work] hours have risen across a wide spectrum of Americans and in all income categories—low, middle, and high. The increase is common to a variety of family patterns—people with and without children, those who are married, and those who are not. And it has been general across industries and, most probably, occupations.

Since the 1960’s, men and women work an extra month more per year with less leisure than ever before.<sup>23</sup> This is what undergraduates will face upon graduation: greater pressures to earn a living, to maintain relationships and, save for the few, reduced opportunities for leisurely activities. Even when given such time, people today find true and genuine leisure harder to enjoy.

Ironically, though Maritain would agree with Schor’s impressive study concerning the lack of time for leisure, he would argue that Schor’s study lacks a coherent definition of “leisure,” preferring instead to call it a “residual,” meaning time distinct from “total working hours.”<sup>24</sup> Maritain would find this vague and indeterminate reference to “leisure” as unpaid free time an impoverished view. He links leisure explicitly to university instruction and liberal education. “Only that leisure,” he writes, “is suitable to what is most human in

---

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), p. 156 (cited hereafter as “RA”).

<sup>22</sup> *EC*, p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> Schor, p. 13.

man, and is of greater worth than work itself, which consists of an expansion of our inner activities in enjoying the fruits of knowledge and beauty. Liberal education enables man to do so."<sup>25</sup>

Here Maritain offers a much more specific and rich understanding that gets to the heart of the liberal arts enterprise and, in so doing, makes explicit what in Newman is implicit. Maritain remarks:

The question will be to have leisure time occupied in a manner really profitable to man, and not entirely taken up by the sort of stupefying passivity that is more often than not developed by movies or television. As long as a new cast of mind does not develop, involving a certain amount of spiritual Epicureanism, the quality of leisure in the modern world will not be on a level with the quality of work.<sup>26</sup>

Maritain is referring to that special delight or joy of human intelligence in extending its range and its power towards what is true, beautiful, and unified in an exercise not pragmatic or egotistical. This type of activity is a kind of rest. As Josef Pieper reminds us, "The Greek word for leisure (σκολη) is the origin of the Latin *scola*, German *Schule*, English *school*."<sup>27</sup> Enlargement of mind and leisure enjoy a long relationship. Indeed, Maritain maintains that "higher forms of leisure are no longer leisure but act come to completion. And the highest form is contemplative activity. *Be still and know that I am God*."<sup>28</sup>

### Human Transcendence

At the higher levels of reasoning and understanding, human intelligence and personal freedom reach out towards being for its own sake. This is because, as Maritain states, "knowledge is contemplative in nature, and that education, in its final and highest achievements, tends

---

<sup>25</sup> EC, p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> Maritain, RA, p. 157.

<sup>27</sup> Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 1998; 1948 reprint), pp. 3-4.

<sup>28</sup> RA, p. 158.



to develop the contemplative capacity of the human mind.”<sup>29</sup> When theology assists the minds of undergraduates to grasp the known for its own sake, a form of human transcendence connected to wisdom occurs. Maritain puts this beautifully:

[K]nowledge is a value in itself and an end in itself; and truth consists in the conformity of the mind with reality—with what is or exists independently of the mind. The intellect tends to grasp and conquer being. Its aim and its joy are essentially disinterested. And “perfect” or “grown-up” knowledge (“science” in the broad Aristotelian sense) reaches certainties which are valid in their pure objectivity—whatever the bents and interests of the individual or collective man may be—and are unshakably established through the intuition of first principles and logical necessity of the deductive or inductive process. Thus, that superior kind of knowledge which is wisdom, because it deals not only with mastering natural phenomena but with penetrating the primary and most universal *raison d’être* and with enjoying, as a final fruition, the spiritual delight of truth and the sapidity of being, fulfills the supreme aspiration of the intellectual nature and its thirst for liberation.<sup>30</sup>

There is enjoyment, a delight in learning. Given the right dispositions of students, intellectual transcendence can occur when the mind engages the most important, broadest realities. Such an experience lifts up and liberates.

Newman and Maritain both presuppose a Christian theological anthropology about the drive of the intellect. The natural drive of human intelligence is towards being as true, good, united and beautiful. To know for the sake of knowing, for the sake of sheer enjoying, transforms the student’s intelligence toward the realities of knowledge, the objects of study, their relationships, their drifts of meaning. Maritain specifically has in mind the influence of those disciplines that directly entail the human person in all its dimensions, perspectives, and ideals—the humanities. Maritain states:

---

<sup>29</sup> *EM*, p. 54.

<sup>30</sup> *EM*, p. 47.

Such things [the humanities] bring to us, in one way or another, the impact of the transcendentals, and oblige us to think really, or at the level of universality.... Knowledge of these things [humanities] helps man to advance toward liberty, fosters in him civilized life, and is by nature in tune with the mind's natural aspiration toward wisdom.<sup>31</sup>

Universal human experiences and emotions and ideas like joy, pain, pleasure, happiness, despair, love, justice, equality, beauty, and goodness are more naturally present and evident within the humanities. The process of studying the human person through the humanities ignites this enlargement of mind. This intellectual experience is an advance towards knowledge that "penetrates and embraces things with the deepest, most universal, and most united insights."<sup>32</sup> To put this differently, one could say that when the intellect "delights" or takes "joy" in an object of knowledge, it is a moment of real transcendence. In part, this occurs because, according to Thomistic teaching, a lower wisdom aspires to a higher wisdom. The natural drive of the human intellect is from the particular, the specific, and the lesser to what is more abstract, more general, and of greater value.

This principle does not simply apply to bodies of knowledge. Consider, for example, what Maritain frames in terms of the relationship between metaphysics and theological knowledge:

The more metaphysics knows being the more it wants to see the cause of being, and in expectancy to pass beyond language and logic, and even in the discursive order to keep to the summits of its spiritual domain (of which it knows the gods are envious), of definitive data and absolutely certain landmarks, points of crystallization in the intellectual order which are more incontestable and more suggestive than those furnished by the senses in physical science. Theology will supply them.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> *EM*, p. 84.

<sup>32</sup> *EC*, p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> Maritain, *Science and Wisdom*, pp. 24-25.

If theological knowledge represents human inquiry into Christian revelation and the ability to relate the created human order to what is divine, and if human intelligence is not impeded in confronting theological insights, claims, doctrines, and so forth, then a real dynamic movement of wonder and desire is awakened. A mind hungry and awakened to the majesty, the goodness, the truth, and the beauty of the real, if properly formed, will desire to move beyond that knowledge, that domain of the known, to something higher.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Maritain expands Newman's more narrow view of natural theology as suitable for undergraduate instruction to something more inclusive of Christian doctrine and its relation to other aspects of culture. He also develops a more sophisticated view of enlargement of mind as the intellectual liberation of the human personality. Moreover, Maritain makes explicit Newman's implicit view of theology as assisting the mind toward a kind of contemplation. For Maritain, the integration of theology with other subject matters becomes a dynamic way of focusing the undergraduate's mind upon the transcendentals of truth, goodness, beauty, and unity, energizing mental powers to be lifted up in their desire for theological and religious meaning.

What I have just described captures something of the 'end' of knowing in a religious and metaphysical sense. Newman and Maritain also offer key insights for how to attain this through the teaching of theology in the university. The development of what Newman calls the "imperial intellect" really concerns more the power of intelligence—its skills, its analytic and synthetic abilities—that a theological *habitus* makes possible. It is, I think, theologically presumptuous to rule out a priori the assistance of grace for any seriously open student. The development of such a *habitus* should not be another kind of pragmatic work suited for ministry or for unpleasurable activity, as something catechetical or commoditized as raw data or "historical information." Cultivation of such habits should be a deeper entry into the metaphysical and religious density of human experience. What such a general theological *habitus* can do, in relating the principles of theology to the expanse of human knowledge and culture, is give way to an attentiveness that becomes intellectual prayer in joyfully reaching out

towards created being as true, as an integrated whole, and as something eminently desirable to know for its own sake.

In a culture that does not value leisure highly, this is not an insignificant challenge. Intellectual instruction should, in some sense, move the person to find a joy that is transcendental. Such an approach sees the objects of knowledge and human capacities as oriented beyond the useful toward goodness, beauty, unity, and truth. In the end, both Newman and Maritain would have agreed with Simone Weil, who writes:

The intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running. Where it is lacking there are no real students, but only poor caricatures of apprentices who, at the end of their apprenticeship, will not even have a trade. It is the part played by joy in our studies that makes of them a preparation for spiritual life, for desire directed toward God is the only power capable of raising the soul. Or rather, it is God alone who comes down and possesses the soul, but desire alone draws God down. He only comes to those who ask him to come; and he cannot refuse to come to those who implore him long, often, and ardently.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Collins, 2001; reprint 1951), p. 61.