Early Franciscan Theology: an Outline

At an early stage, Francis’s movement was a lay movement. Francis himself was not a cleric, had no formal education, did not read or write Latin well, and did not know theology. However, from the very beginning the movement attracted the attention of clerics and educated people, who began to join the movement.

Francis distinguishes between laymen and clerics in the Early Rule (see text): clerics and educated brothers are assigned a different and more sophisticated way of saying the monastic hours as opposed to the “Our Father” of laymen. Also respect for priests and the eucharist is expressed very strongly, especially in the parts composed after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 that emphasized the importance of religious life, the eucharist, and holy communion. However, neither Francis nor Clare encourage the education of illiterate brothers and sisters: they are not to learn how to read and not to have any books.

After Francis’s resignation in 1220 and certainly after his death, however, clerics and educated brothers take over. Their struggle against lay brothers and adherents of the stricter interpretation of the Rule will be highlighted in the next section, about “highest poverty” and “Spiritual” Franciscans. By the time Bonaventure, who was a cleric and a prominent scholar and theologian himself, becomes Minister General of the Order, the clericalization of the Order and the interpretation of the Rule in terms of needs and functions of clerics and educated people becomes obvious in the Constitutions of Narbonne, 1260 (written under Bonaventure). First of all, only clerics are to be admitted to the order, with rare exceptions. The “work” requirement of the early brothers is interpreted as “writing and studying,” and provisions are made to send friars to be educated in theology at universities and to be amply supplied with books. See excerpts from the Narbonne Constitutions attached to this section.

Relationship between scripture and tradition; theology as interpretation of scripture and tradition

Most if not all religious and spiritual traditions utilize ‘scripture’ as a written or oral (the Hindu shruti) record of the original experience of the founder(s), as well as ‘tradition’ (the Hindu smriti) as unwritten memory of practices associated with the tradition. Theology is a discipline that interprets scripture to the community of faith. We already spoke of the early Christian idea of the four senses according to which scripture can be interpreted: literal, historical, allegorical, and ethical. A document that lays out the basic principles of interpreting scripture for contemporary Catholics is the Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in 1965. See the document attached to this section with relevant excerpts highlighted in yellow.

The question remains, however, what exactly the “word of God” is and how to interpret it. Early Franciscan theologians, such as Alexander of Hales and Peter of John Olivi (see texts attached to this section) note that scripture is a collection of diverse materials, such as historical narratives about particular persons, places, and events; laws, rules, and admonitions; prophecies; records of visions and so forth. It does not seem to have any one subject, focus, or point of departure.
Early Western universities and the development of the scholastic method

In order to address this complex issue, Western Christians gradually developed an academic method that allowed them to tackle the problem of interpretation.

Since the seventh century AD, so-called “Collections of Sentences,” or statements and pronouncements by Christian scholars and ecclesiastical authorities, started to appear. These collections simply grouped statements by prominent Christian authorities according to topics (for example, God, the Trinity, moral teachings, etc.). By the twelfth century, many such collections were in existence. The problem was that many of these statements disagreed with each other. How can one reconcile this fact with the divine origin of Christian teaching that is therefore supposed to exhibit unity and coherence? At this point Peter Abelard (1079-1142), a prominent Parisian scholar, in his work Sic et Non (Yes and No) came up with an academic method of dealing with disagreeing and contradictory statements. The method consists in pitching contradictory statements of Church authorities against each other and then resolving the contradictions by showing how these statements can be reconciled and seen as saying the same thing (for example by pointing out that they look at the issue under different angles or in different circumstances). Thus the scholastic method (the method of the Schools) developed that consisted in three steps:

- Stating opinions for and against (pro and contra)
- Providing a solution to the issue
- Answering objections raised at the beginning

(For example, see the text of Alexander of Hales attached to this section that follows this format.)

At this point another prominent Parisian theologian, Peter Lombard (1096-1160), creates his own “Collection of Sentences” where he solidifies the scholastic method developed by Abelard and applies it to a selection of theological topics, such as God, Christ, human nature, ethics, etc., which almost immediately becomes standard for Western Christian universities and gains a papal approval therefore becoming the Catholic Church’s official interpretation of scripture and theological topics.

Since that time, the majority of theological works produced at European universities up to modern times were “Commentaries on the Sentences of Peter Lombard.” Every theologian graduating from a major university had to lecture on the “Sentences” and produce a commentary. Another genre that was very similar to the “Commentary on the Sentences” was called the “Sum of Theology” or Summa (the most famous Summa is the “Sum of Theology” by Thomas Aquinas). It employed the same scholastic method as the “Commentary on the Sentences.” Franciscan theologians were no exception, and all of them created such “Commentaries on the Sentences” or “Sums of Theology.”
There were also collections of legal statements with commentaries, especially those on Canon law (or ecclesiastical law), which were very similar to theological works. Several popes important to the Franciscan movement, such as Innocent III and Gregory IX, were canon lawyers and authored such collections with commentaries.

To point out the contrast, while in modern thought the emphasis is on “free thinking” when we start from scratch and assume no authority apart from human reason, which is supposed to provide us with all answers, a tradition that is based on authority, such as the medieval Franciscan tradition, relies on truths that are revealed in scriptures and authoritative texts that could not necessarily be arrived at by logical thinking. Thus early Franciscan theologians use scripture and early Franciscan documents (such as the Rule) as authoritative texts to interpret and comment upon. Subsequent theologians use earlier theologians to comment upon (thus producing “commentaries on commentaries”), and so forth. This technique of commenting on authoritative texts is very common and exists in all major religious traditions, such as Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.

**Early Franciscan theologians on the nature of theology, or on what theology is**

As opposed to what is widely believed in this society, there is not one but different types of truth. Our society usually accepts only one type of truth, the “truth of correspondence” or factual truth, when belief is created by being able to make a logical argument and link statements to actual facts in a scientific way. However, early Franciscans, when they discussed what theology is, recognized other types of truth, in addition to the “truth of correspondence” or factual truth:

- affective or emotional truth: what you are emotional about is the truth; belief, hope, emotion are the foundation of understanding
- truth of coherence: what is coherent and complete is true; this model works especially well for semiotic systems: language systems, coherent texts, narratives, and other cultural systems
- “thick description” as a subcategory of “coherence”: what can be described coherently and “thickly,” or in concrete detail, is true; this model applies especially well to texts and narratives
- practical truth: what leads to valid or “true” practical results is true; “true” equals “effective” at achieving positive results

(Several models of truth that are current in contemporary theology [disclosure, coherence/thick description] are described in more detail at the end of this section. Surprisingly, postmodern theology is more in line with the medieval [pre-modern] theology of early Franciscans than with modern theology, which validates the thought of early Franciscans and makes it more relevant to us.)

As opposed to the Dominican school where Thomism capitalizes on rational proofs (for example, the famous “proofs of the existence of God” in Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa*), early Franciscan theologians assume alternative models of truth and understand theology correspondingly:
theology as an affective or emotional method that creates belief by way of experiencing emotions.

theology as a method that creates belief by creating a coherent picture of reality.

theology as a method that creates belief by using concrete examples, historical narratives, telling stories of concrete people and places, that is, by “thickly describing” what is to be believed.

theology as a practical method that leads to valid results; thus belief is assured by true results, not correspondence to facts or logical arguments.

Alexander of Hales starts by pointing out that theology, which interprets sacred scripture, deals with a variety of topics, such as history, individual persons and events, matters of belief, etc., that do not fall under any one general area or discipline in a strict sense. Thus theology seems to be rather “wisdom” than science. The Latin word for “wisdom” with which Franciscan theologians operate is sapientia. It comes from the verb sapere, which means “to taste,” so sapientia really means “tasting” or “ability to taste.” Therefore theology as wisdom has to do with concrete experience and feeling, rather than with arguments and logic. Thus, Alexander concludes, it is an “affective” discipline, or the one that deals with feelings and emotions.

How does an affective discipline work? It works not by logical arguments, but by means of examples, historical narratives, mentioning particular persons, issuing particular admonitions that arouse emotions. However, according to early Franciscan theologians, the faith that is formed as a result of these emotional responses leads to a deeper understanding of the issues.

According to Alexander, theology is also a practical, not a speculative discipline, which is based on practical truths. For example, the stories told in scriptures could be factually false, but they are practically true, in that they lead to valid practical results (for example, better morality or better understanding of complex issues).

Bonaventure pretty much shares the same view of theology as wisdom. It is an affective discipline that is based on an affective or emotional type of knowledge, for example that “Christ died for us.” Emotion comes before deeper theological knowledge can arise. Theology is also mostly a practical science, which works by way of generating affection first, which leads to positive practical results.

Peter of John Olivi also points out that as scripture seems to be a collection of diverse materials, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact nature of theology. He agrees with Alexander and Bonaventure that theology is wisdom and a practical discipline, not a speculative science. In theology, belief is not based on rational arguments. However, he adds an interesting and very sophisticated analysis of theology. It is the concreteness of scripture and theology, according to Olivi, with its stories of concrete events and persons, that makes it so believable. According to St. Jerome, “people believe fishermen, not theologians.” Olivi compares scripture and theology to a father teaching his son the wisdom of life. A father’s instructions may include stories of concrete people and places, some practical advice, rules, admonitions, and other types of material. This means that theology is instructional and practical in its nature; it is designed to achieve certain results. In contemporary terms, Olivi shows that theology deals with the truth of coherence by providing a “thick description” of reality (this term is explained better in the section below).
At the same time, all Franciscan theologians, especially later ones such as John Duns Scotus (died in 1308), stress that theology is more than opinion. There is a method to theology, even though it is not exact science. Theology begins with believed premises (unlike science, which starts with scientifically known premises) and continues to logical conclusions (like science). Alexander also notes that although theology begins with something concrete, it proceeds to generalizations (again, just like science).

**On the types of truth in postmodern theology**

*Truth as disclosure*

Modern thought is characterized by an emphasis on truth as correspondence. However, postmodern thought, starting with Martin Heidegger, a celebrated German philosopher, questions the hegemony of this model of truth. He proposes a different model of truth: truth as disclosure or unconcealedness, which is supported by what is called the hermeneutic trend in European philosophy led by another German philosopher, Georg Gadamer (“hermeneutic” means having to do with interpretation, from the Greek word for “interpretation”). Truth as disclosure refers to when something makes us realize something, the moment when we become aware of something we have not been aware of before. It doesn’t have to correspond to anything, just to result in a realization of something about reality, when something “comes to light” and becomes disclosed as opposed to hidden and concealed. According to Heidegger, even the notion of truth as correspondence is ultimately reducible to something that is immediately evident, for example whether the two things “fit” together or not, just like physical pieces of a puzzle.

David Tracy, a contemporary Catholic theologian, in his famous book *Analogical Imagination* theorizes that in religion or theology truth is disclosed as a result of a hermeneutic process when we read a “religious classic.” When we read a classic of literature, “we find ourselves ‘caught up’ in its world, we are shocked, surprised, challenged by its startling beauty and its recognizable truth... In the actual experience of art ... we recognize the truth of the work’s disclosure of a world of reality transforming, if only for a moment, ourselves....” The model of truth as disclosure, according to Tracy, is most suitable to systematic theology. Both art and religion disclose truth, and the task of a theologian must be “allowing that disclosure to ‘happen’” through careful and attentive interpretation and involvement.

*Truth as coherence; intratextuality; thick description*

The tendency to undermine the model of truth as correspondence started by Heidegger and his followers is continued by the proponents of the theory of “intratextuality” (for example, the “Yale school”), who can be seen as developing ideas implicit in late Heidegger and suggest a “coherence” model of truth. Language creates a symbolic world of meaning that is internally coherent: in it, what is true is equated with what is meaningful, and meaning determines reference. In the same way, texts can also be inwardly coherent and contain their truth within themselves, without references to anything external (without “correspondence”). According to George Lindbeck’s account of the intratextual, or cultural-linguistic approach (as outlined in his book *The Nature of Doctrine*), as opposed to an “objective” approach that refers to external
realities, “for cultural-linguists the meaning is immanent.” Lindbeck uses Geertz’s (and originally Ryle’s) idea that culture is something within which all sorts of phenomena can be intelligibly (or thickly) described. Such “thick description” is all-encompassing and is a creative and demanding imaginative exercise, whose test of faithfulness “is the degree to which descriptions correspond to the semiotic universe paradigmatically encoded in holy writ.”

However, not only religious texts can be interpreted “...in terms of [their] immanent meanings....” For example, great novels or works of literature “create their own world” with their own interpretive criteria and set of references whose description (e.g., literary criticism) is an intratextual task. For the people who are steeped in these worlds created by texts (such as the world of scripture) “no world is more real than the ones they create.” In this case, the text absorbs the world, not the world the text. Thus Christian scriptures or great novels can be viewed as intrinsically meaningful narrative structures that shape the “external” world according to their own patterns.

Moreover, such internal coherence or meaningfulness is not reserved exclusively for religious or literary texts. Lindbeck, speaking of “intratextuality” as a certain internal coherence that exists within a religious tradition or theological discourse, remarks that “in an extended or improper sense, something like intratextuality is characteristic of the descriptions of not only religion but also other forms of rule-governed human behavior from carpentry and mathematics to languages and cultures,” although “meaning is more fully intratextual in semiotic systems ... than in other forms of ruled human behavior...” This means that, just as theology can be intratextual, in the sense of not only explaining religion “from within” but also describing anything “outside” in terms of this religion, or in terms of the narrative structures of its foundational texts, so can other disciplines.

The idea that something internally coherent can be by the same token meaningful without involving the concept of truth as correspondence is extremely important. It allows us to eliminate the need for constantly seeking some correspondence with an external object as a criterion of truth, legitimacy, or value, and instead switch to the criteria of internal coherence: given the interpreted material, how well a certain interpretation holds together.