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## Response to the 2007-8 Presidential Seminar on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

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## Response to the 2007-8 Presidential Seminar on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Tom Curran

9/24/08

In applying for the Presidential Seminar my goal was essentially to learn more about the Catholic intellectual tradition (CIT) so that I could help design and teach our core-curriculum course and organize the training of adjunct instructors who carry a substantial share of the teaching burden. Having completed the main portion of the seminar, I believe that deepening my acquaintance with the tradition did turn out to be of considerable help to me in these projects. Although I would have to say that I had already begun to study the CIT before we got started, the seminar definitely accelerated my learning process.

I believe the seminar also helped me greatly both in recruiting adjuncts in the summer of 2007 and in leading my department's search for a tenure-track American historian last year. We had to hire quite a few (7) adjuncts that summer because of the departure of Dr. Bademan and Dr. Roney's impending sabbatical leave, and I believe my participation in the week-long seminar session in June '07 put me in a much better position to explain our program's underlying concepts, goals and objectives than I had been in before. There is also no doubt in my mind that once we began evaluating applications for the tenure-track post last December, the familiarity with the CIT that I gained through the seminar made me a more astute reader of the (100+) applications we received and a more effective communicator of the university's mission and instructional agenda. Dr. Paul Siff and I interviewed twenty-five candidates at the annual conference of the American Historical Association last January, and in our hour-long conversations with each of those candidates I think I was able to convey our intentions clearly and assess with some sensitivity the candidates' comments regarding the university's mission. Indeed, looking back, I wish I had enrolled in the seminar a year earlier than I so that I could have more intelligently overseen the department's search for a classicist in 2006. I am very pleased with the results of that search, but I believe a deeper understanding and appreciation of Catholicism and its history would have made a difference in the way I represented my department and the university.

Ultimately, the greatest benefit I incurred from the seminar was the opportunity it gave me to read about, think about, and hear discussed major topics in Catholic thought, one of which I am using to render my own sections of HICC 101 both coherent and more reflective of our mission. There are many potentially helpful themes that one could use to tie such as course as The Human Journey together, but the one that appeals to me most is the relationship in Catholic thought between Greco-Roman rationalism and Judeo-Christian faith. In the earlier version of our core course (HI 101, Civilizations) I taught that the greatest contribution the Greeks made to the progress of Western civilization was their conviction that the world can and should be understood through the application of mankind's powers of reasoning. The notion that great and universal questions pertaining to truth, beauty, and justice have answers that man has the capacity to discover through observation and the exercise of his intellect is an idea that one finds both implicitly and explicitly presented in some of the writings of classical thinkers. It is an

achievement that stands among the world's civilizations as uniquely Western, and it is one which I believe Sacred Heart ought to and does ask our students to ponder.

What I have come to understand about the West in the past couple of years, however, is just how much we owe to the founders of the other great tradition of which Western culture is composed: that of the early Hebrews and their Christian successors. Through my readings and other activities over the past couple of years, of which the seminar is but one albeit a very important component, I have come to appreciate the significance of the Judeo-Christian notion that the greatest truths of all are those which only God can perceive (although humans can approach them with His help). In the Catholic tradition, mankind's powers of reasoning and observation can by themselves take us only so far. It is as though, in St. Paul's famous words, when we view the world we see it but "through a glass, darkly."<sup>1</sup> The insight offered by the Hebrews and early Christians is that, as magnificent as mankind is, in the final analysis man stands before God incapable of perceiving ultimate reality without His divine guidance and grace. It is a message of both humility and hope, and to Jewish and Christian thinkers throughout the centuries it is one that has been accepted largely on the basis of faith. Within the Judeo-Christian heritage there is ample textual justification for this argument. One finds many writers affirming that the true sources of inspiration about matters essential to understanding the world and living a purposeful life are to be found not in the writings of the classical scholars but in the pages of the Bible, the writings of Hebrew and Christian thinkers, and the lived experience of generations of ordinary believers.

Here, then, we have two threads of argumentation, one rationalistic, and one devotional and rooted in faith. In my sections of HICC 101 I have chosen to explore the ways by which these two strains of thought evolved, at first essentially in isolation from one another, and later in profound and sustained interaction. I find it fascinating that Christian thinkers who were also classical scholars were deeply conscious of the contradiction that separates these two threads. An awareness of the complexity of the matter came to rest at the very heart of the Western tradition as the Greco-Roman and Hebrew-Christian streams of thought were merged during the middle to late Roman Empire. Some of the most careful thinkers in the Western world thought deeply about how (indeed, whether one should even try) to reconcile the two streams, and I have tried to follow their thinking on the subject as I built my course. As a result, my students engage foundational texts in both the classical and the Judeo-Christian traditions, and they explore some of the efforts Christians made to address the relationship between faith and reason directly. Below I will briefly introduce the texts I have chosen for my students. When references are made to items that my department has placed in our HICC 101 primary source collection, page numbers refer to the MS Word files that instructors were given as supplements to the protected (PDF) files to which students have access via their course section Blackboard pages.

It is important to note that in this course my students read a wide variety of texts that address issues other than the one I have chosen to use as a unifying theme. Here, however, we will only discuss texts that serve the express purpose of following the thread of faith and reason. Although the course actually begins with a unit on the Ancient Near East, with selections from two ancient Babylonian texts and the first two books of the Old Testament, for the purposes of this thread we begin with the Greeks, and we do so by choosing texts that reveal the emphasis on systematic

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians, 13:12.



reasoning that was characteristic of classical Greek thought. Plato's *Apology* is covered at length because of Socrates's message regarding a person's obligation to subject his or her beliefs to the test of reason. As Socrates famously put it, "the life which is unexamined is not worth living."<sup>2</sup> Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease* [400 BC], is used to indicate that classical Greek thinkers were moving beyond their mythopoeic traditions and toward an understanding of the world that posited the existence of natural law. In this case, the writer proposes that diseases and human afflictions have natural causes, rather than supernatural ones; the gods play no direct role in causing them, and it makes sense therefore to investigate the natural causes of diseases in the expectation that humans might discover effective cures or treatments. Next, we consult Plato again. In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato introduces his famous allegory of the cave, which he uses to suggest, among other things, that man's powers of understanding are limited by the imperfections of his senses. (Incidentally, Plato's belief that beyond the range of human perception there exist higher forms of truth is a concept that laid a foundation for the introduction of Christianity centuries after Plato's death. Later Christian thinkers, especially St. Augustine, were deeply cognizant of the Platonic view that absolute truths exist, and they found in Christian faith a pathway toward discovery of truth that, for all of its success, Greco-Roman rationalism was unable to find. Later in this course my students encounter Augustine, and they follow him for a while as he wrestles with the problem of how best to understand the world and mankind's role in it. His quest, of course, takes him to Christian faith.) We close our Greek sequence with a selection from Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* in which Aristotle describes the syllogism. Unlike Plato, for whom truth seems always to be a bit beyond human reach, Aristotle leaves one with the impression that truth is something which man can discern by careful observation and the application of systematic reasoning. Here he describes what would become the major analytical tool in the Western intellectual tradition for a thousand years, and my students will return to it later when they encounter St. Thomas Aquinas, as the Scholastic theologian uses it to verify elements of Catholic doctrine.

After our Greek unit, we move to the Hellenistic period where we observe the rise of Roman civilization and Stoic philosophy. The first text we would like to cover as we follow our thread forward would be one by Zeno, the founder of Stoic thought, but since none of his writings have survived we must make do with an introduction to the subject found in our survey text and a set of readings by Hellenistic or Roman thinkers who dealt with concepts that Zeno appears to have introduced. By the way, one thing that has impressed greatly me as I have developed this course is the extent to which successive generations of European thinkers during the period covered in the course (ca. 2,000 BCE, to ca. 1600 CE) were engaged in a dialogue with their predecessors. As a student of Chinese history, this was not really a surprise to me. Nevertheless, it is a quality that I have found prominently displayed in the texts I have chosen. I have come to understand the Catholic intellectual tradition itself as a centuries-long conversation, and I go to some length to make sure my students see it this way as well.

The first selection with which we work in this unit is Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, in which the author argues that the universe is infinite, eternal, wholly material, and logically consistent. Although I am not sure he argues for the existence of natural laws, at least in this piece, it is clear that he is moving in the direction of comprehending the universe as though it is governed by laws which, as Aristotle might have said, are immutable, universal in their application, and

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Apology*, p. 14.

understandable to those with powers of understanding sufficient to comprehend them. We supplement this piece with a portion of Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* in which Lucretius expounds further on the materialist point of view introduced by Epicurus. The next set of texts, however, is of greater significance in the context of the thread we are following: Seneca, from *Letters to Lucilius*, Letters # 76, 92, and 124. In these three letters Seneca states clearly a Stoic concept that I believe became an important bridge that enabled Greco-Roman rationalism and Judeo-Christian faith to meet: the idea that humans are creatures to whom God has given, uniquely, the quality of reason. Building on the Aristotelian notion that all creatures have their particular good (or virtue), Lucretius points out that the particular good of man is reason. "And what quality is best in man?" he writes, "It is reason; and by virtue of reason he surpasses the animals, and is surpassed only by the gods."<sup>3</sup> This, I think, is a fascinating statement and as we move forward in our course we encounter its echoes in selections from other writers, notably Cicero, Augustine, and Pico della Mirandola.

Cicero is the next important thinker we have who deals with man's capacity to understand. Although he preceded Seneca by about a century, we deal with him at the end of this section because his elaboration of our theme is a bit more complete than what we are using from Seneca. In the two pieces we have from Cicero, *On the Nature of Gods* and *Treatise on Laws*, we find him amplifying the Stoic notion of man's uniqueness by virtue of his possession of the capacity to think, making it clear that such capacity is the work of a supreme God, and joining man and God together as beings in possession of a common faculty: the ability to perceive and understand universal law.

Following our course trajectory, with Cicero we bring to a close our study of pre-Christian writers within the classical tradition, and we turn to the Hebrews and Christians in search of texts that articulate the Judeo-Christian point of view that truth is a gift of God that must be accepted on faith. The course actually begins with readings from ancient Mesopotamian and Hebrew texts that trace the history of Hebrew thought and culture (e.g., selections from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and *Leviticus*), but it is not until our coverage of the classical period is complete that we turn our attention directly to the theme of faith as a mode of understanding. The clear emphasis that the Hebrews placed on laws given to the faithful by God is made explicit in the course through our early discussion of portions of *Exodus* and *Leviticus*, but once we have problematized the contradiction between faith and reason in our coverage of the classical period, we turn directly to Hebrew texts that highlight that contradiction.

That it is man's obligation, first and foremost, to obey God's commandments is made abundantly clear in our selections from *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and *Leviticus*. That the Hebrews self-consciously chose to privilege faith over reason is perhaps implicit throughout the Old Testament, but it is also made quite clear in the second creation story in *Genesis*, in which man's original sin is the effort to seek forbidden knowledge against the express commandment of God. The choice that the Hebrews have made here is perhaps best read allegorically (though it is nevertheless clear). There are, however, other passages in the Old Testament in which the decision the Hebrews' made is stated explicitly. *Proverbs*, 1.7, for example, states very simply that, "The fear of the

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<sup>3</sup> Lucretius, *Letters to Lucilius*, #76.

Lord is the beginning of knowledge....”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the author of the *Book of Ecclesiastes* warns us that the pursuit of knowledge, “to seek and search out all that is done under heaven,” is “an unhappy business,” one that is not only futile but is likely to yield little but heartache: “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”<sup>5</sup> Again, from the same source: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the prophet Isaiah tells us that the Lord warns His people that should they fail to honor his commandments He would punish them by depriving them of their understanding: “...and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”<sup>7</sup>

With the coming of Christianity the association of God and wisdom in the Judeo-Christian tradition was reinforced. As Robert Louis Wilken points out, “...the New Testament identified Christ with Wisdom...,” and it often shows that references to wisdom in the Old Testament were understood by early Christian thinkers “to refer directly to Christ.”<sup>8</sup> The famous first paragraph of the *Gospel According to John* simply declares that since the beginning “the Word was God.” I admit to being a bit uncertain as to the meaning of this cryptic text, but it seems to me that the term Word may be synonymous with truth, wisdom, or ultimate reality. There can be no doubt, however, about the message conveyed by St. Paul. For him, faith is the preeminent vehicle for seeking wisdom, for not only does he state repeatedly that in the eyes of God a man is justified by his faith only, but in *First Corinthians* he explicitly declares that those who seek the truth by means other than through faith in Christ are following a false path. Because I think it is a fairly unusual passage, perhaps it is worth quoting in full:

“Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both the Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of god is stronger than men.”<sup>9</sup>

It should be emphasized that, while the Hebrews and Christians did uphold the principle that the truths revealed by God are of a higher order than those which humans unaided by revelation can approach, even the early Hebrews took one step toward a more rational understand of the world when they asserted God’s transcendence over nature. Unlike the supernatural beings recognized by other Near Eastern peoples, Yahweh was neither identical to nor subject to the workings of

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<sup>4</sup> Proverbs, 1.7.

<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes, 1.12-18.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 12.13.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah, 29.14.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), P. 95.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians, 1:20-25.



any force of nature. Rather, to the Hebrews, God alone created nature in all of its aspects, and the universe operated in accordance with a plan that He Himself designed. By removing nature from the realm of mythology, the Hebrews may have taken a step toward a more rational understanding of the world. There is no doubt that it was the Greeks, not the Hebrews, who invented systematic, rational thought. Nevertheless, as the authors of the survey text we have chosen for HICC 101 suggest, by asserting the presence of “a transcendent God and the orderliness of his creation,” the Hebrews had envisioned a universe that “could accommodate Greek science.”<sup>10</sup> In my sections of HICC 101, in addition to tracing the major threads of the integrating theme I have chosen, we look for opportunities to identify elements of Hebrew and Greco-Roman thought that are similar. This is one such opportunity. Others include the universality of human nature—a concept that only begins to appear in the Western world during the immediate post-classical, Hellenistic, period—the existence of a soul, and notions regarding the individual and his or her moral autonomy. We are looking in this course for ways to explain the convergence of the two conceptual universes that make up the Catholic intellectual tradition, and when it is possible to draw such connections the links are made explicit.

Needless to say, my students also study the effort made to spread the Christian message (they read the *Acts of the Apostles* and *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*), and they are made aware of the relatively rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world. It is, in my judgment, an astonishing story, and one with which Sacred Heart students should become acquainted. The process of Christianization, of course, caused interesting problems for intellectuals in the Roman world. Most of them were soundly educated in the classical tradition, and Christian presuppositions about the primacy of faith over man's reason did not go unnoticed. For those who were both classical scholars and Christians, the problem of the relationship between reason and faith emerged with particular poignancy, and it is those people to whom we turn next in the course.

The first Christian thinker with whom we deal who commented directly on the relationship between faith and reason is Tertullian (150-225 CE), a Christian who believed there could be no compromise between the two modes of knowing. My students begin by reading his “On the Proscription of Heretics,” an essay in which Tertullian argues that rationalism, indeed, philosophy itself, leads to heresies. One by one, he attacks Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans, and the Stoics, and he cites St. Paul directly, warning followers of Christ to “See that no one beguile you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, and contrary to the wisdom of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>11</sup> After asking the famous rhetorical question, “What indeed has Athens got to do with Jerusalem,” he closes his piece with a direct attack on Greco-Roman rationalism:

Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Marvin Perry, et. al., *Western Civilization: Ideas, Politics, and Society*, eighth edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2007), p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Referring to Paul's Epistle to the Colossians, 2:8. Tertullian, “On the Proscription of Heretics,” p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Tertullian, p. 4.

From Tertullian we also have an excerpt from "On the Flesh of Christ," a piece in which Tertullian asserts, in effect, that various elements of Christian faith that appear contradictory, such as that Jesus was both divine, the Son of God, and capable of suffering the crucifixion and death, must simply be accepted on faith. In what is to me an absolutely fascinating statement, Tertullian says that such things are either absurd or impossible, and therefore they must be believed:

The Son of God was crucified; I am not ashamed because men must needs be ashamed of it. And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried, and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible.<sup>13</sup>

During the course of the Presidential Seminar I have taken the opportunity when it presented itself to ask our guests if they thought my understanding of Tertullian's message is accurate, and at this point I am inclined to think that it is.

Next, we go to a contemporary of Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria (150-220 CE). Clement was a Neo-Platonic Christian who believed reason can and should be put to the service of faith, and he wrote a book, *Stromata* [Miscellaneous], in which he defended pagan rationalism. Hee, he asserted two things that are of particular interest to us: 1) for pagans of the classical period who, by definition, did not receive revealed Christian truths, rationalism was a functional alternative to faith that made it possible for them to live good and decent lives without divine guidance, and 2) for Christians, the study of philosophy is training for the acceptance and understanding of Christ's teachings; the discipline of reasoned inquiry that one acquires through the study of philosophy is preparation for the intellectual rigors of engagement with Christian belief. To quote briefly, he writes, "...it is impossible for a man without learning to comprehend the things which are declared in the faith."<sup>14</sup> He insists, of course, that faith is indispensable to Christian belief—"For the teaching of piety is a gift, but faith is grace"<sup>15</sup>—but the thrust of his work appears to me to be aimed at justifying to believers the continue relevance of man's reason in light of revelation, and it is easy to sense in his piece a defensiveness regarding pagan philosophy that suggests he was participating in a dialogue with people such as Tertullian who sought to dismiss reason as a tool for understanding God's plan.

For me, our next thinker, St. Augustine, is the most interesting of all those whom I have encountered in the seminar and in preparing my course.<sup>16</sup> St. Jerome wrote to him that "Catholics acknowledge and revere you as the second founder of the ancient faith," and John Henry Newman wrote that "The great luminary of the western world is, as we know, St.

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<sup>13</sup> Tertullian, "On the Flesh of Christ," p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, P. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., P. 4.

<sup>16</sup> I have deliberately skipped Plotinus (ca. 205-270 CE), a pagan and the most famous of the Neo-Platonic thinkers. In the primary source collection that we built for HICC 101 there is a translation of his *Six Enneads*, and I am generally aware of how much influence he had on other thinkers of the late Roman Empire (especially Augustine), but I believe I have to read his text more closely before I will be able to make use of it in my course. Although I do have my students read a short excerpt that deals with the soul, on my first reading of the text I thought it a bit complicated for our freshmen. I do, however, plan to return to it for another look.



Augustine; he, no infallible teacher, has formed the intellect of Christian Europe.”<sup>17</sup> From my brief encounter with some of his writings and a bit of the scholarship that surrounds him, I believe I understand Jerome’s and Newman’s enthusiasm. It would take years for me to become an expert in Augustine’s thought, but from what I have been able to discern the most important place to start would be his *Confessions*. To me, this is a wonderful book for many reasons, but of particular relevance here is that portion of it in which Augustine discusses the urges that drove him toward faith in God and the path he took toward acceptance of God’s revelation. His explanation, as passionate a self-revelation as one is likely to find anywhere, is rooted in his thirst for knowledge and his discovery that, while reason can take man some distance toward it, without God ultimate truth (very much in the Platonic sense; it is for good reason that Augustine has been called a Christian Platonist) remains concealed. In *Confessions*, Augustine begins his quest for truth when as a young man he stumbles across a work by Cicero called *Hortensius* (no longer extant) in which the great Roman writer urges the reader toward philosophy. When Augustine introduces the piece, he speaks, as he often does in *Confessions*, of his soul being “on fire” with the desire to understand: “I was urged on and inflamed with a passionate zeal to love and seek and obtain and embrace and hold fast wisdom itself, whatever it might be.”<sup>18</sup> (Later in the text, having discovered God through the Scriptures, Augustine describes heaven as “...the heaven of heavens, that intellectual heaven, where it is the property of the intellect to know all things.”<sup>19</sup>) Inspired by Cicero’s exhortation to learn, Augustine begins a quest for understanding that takes him to the writings of the great Neo-Platonist philosophers Plotinus and Porphyry who, Lucy Beckett tells us, bowled him over with their “intellectual excitement.”<sup>20</sup> Beckett says that it was from these texts that Augustine “discovered how close Plato had come to an understanding of the being of God.”<sup>21</sup> It is also clear, however, that he remained unconvinced that the Platonists had found complete truth, and it was not until he read the Scriptures that he came to believe that God had revealed the pathway to perfect knowledge.

In Book VII, Chapter 9 of *Confessions* Augustine explains his discovery by noting that God had made available to him “books written by the Platonists, which had been translated from Greek into Latin.”<sup>22</sup> Augustine clearly finds these works instructive and illuminating—he is struck by the degree to which many Platonic thinkers illuminated ideas that were otherwise to be found only in the Scriptures—but he also notes that the Scriptures contained truths (which he goes to some trouble to list) that the Platonists had failed to perceive: the rationalistic thinkers of the pagan world had provided only a partial view of reality, and for the complete picture—to see beyond St. Paul’s darkened glass—one cannot but turn to God.

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<sup>17</sup> Both quotes are in Lucy Beckett, *In the Light of Christ: Writings in the Western Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), p. 126. Henry Chadwick asserted that Augustine was the most intelligent man in the Roman Empire. See Wilken, p. 164.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Rex Warner, transl. (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1963.), Book 3, Chapter 4, p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Book 12, Chapter 13, p. 293.

<sup>20</sup> Beckett, p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 7:9:147. Note: Augustine did not read Greek and appears not to have read Plato himself.

What are we to make of the intellectual journey Augustine took, and how might it be used in the development of my course thread? I have not had much of an opportunity yet to read Augustine's *City of God*, but Lucy Beckett writes that one may find there, especially in Book X, "a fair survey of the pre-Socratic enquirers into the nature of the universe,...and a good discussion of Plato's closeness to Christian truth," as well as an explanation as to why pagan philosophers resisted Christian revelation. A rough interpretation of Beckett's summary is that Augustine thought the philosophers lacked the humility to admit the weaknesses of their rationalistic methods.<sup>23</sup> They were, Augustine seems to have believed, not open to the possibility that there are understandings that one can only reach through faith. Though acquired in the first instance without the benefit of logic, in Augustine's mind these truths are nevertheless certain and real. They satisfied his private and extraordinarily intense longing to know. For Augustine, faith in revealed truth provided the answers to questions that his soul was "on fire" to answer. As I believe has often been said about him, his deepest thinking on the subject represents the Christian sense that faith can lead to understanding. This concept—faith seeking understanding—places Augustine securely within the evolving Catholic tradition, and next to the Biblical texts and the pieces by Plato and Aristotle that I have on my syllabus, insofar as this topic is concerned the excerpts from *Confessions* are probably the most important texts my students read.

Our thread on faith and reason does not come to an end, of course, with Augustine. Our next thinker who deals with the subject is Boethius (480-c. 525), sometimes referred to as one of the last thinkers to try to preserve classical culture in a Europe that was passing rapidly into its medieval phase. Marvin Perry, et. al. refer to him as "the last Latin-speaking scholar of the Roman world to have mastered the Greek Language and to have intimate knowledge of Greek philosophy." He was, Perry writes, "a bridge between a classical civilization too weakened to be revived and a Christian civilization still in embryo."<sup>24</sup> The text we have chosen from Boethius is his famous *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a brilliantly crafted piece in which Boethius attempts to join faith to reason by means of an imaginary conversation between himself and the muse of philosophy. In the story, written when Boethius was facing imminent death, having been condemned unjustly by his king, the muse visits Boethius in his prison cell and consoles him with the knowledge that philosophy teaches us that as dismal as things may seem, because his fate is in the hands of a just god he need have no fear of death. A bit like Socrates, who in the *Apology* famously comments that no evil can come to a just man, Boethius allows the muse to conclude the piece with an encouraging enjoinder to "...thank the Giver of all health that your nature [as a reasoning being] has not altogether left you. We have yet the chief spark for your health's fire [wisdom], for you have a true knowledge of the hand that guides the universe: you do believe that its government is not subject to random chance, but to divine reason. Therefore have no fear."<sup>25</sup>

After Boethius we work with St. Thomas Aquinas by reading a paragraph from Aristotle's *On the Heavens* (for an example of Aristotelian logic at work) and two longer excerpts from Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*: "Treatise on the One God," and "Treatise on Sacred Doctrine."

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<sup>23</sup> Beckett, p. 106-107.

<sup>24</sup> Perry, et. al., p. 208.

<sup>25</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 9.

Aquinas went further than any thinker in the Catholic tradition to reconcile faith and reason, and he did so by applying the tools of systematic reasoning to prove elements of Christian doctrine to be true beyond a reasonable doubt. The texts we have chosen are very difficult for students to read, but I believe it is important for students to sample them in order to get a sense of how seriously late medieval thinkers took their obligation as thinking Christians to demonstrate that there is no conflict between reason and Catholic doctrine. In our selections from the *Summa* we find St. Thomas demonstrating through the use of pure logic that 1) God actually exists, and that 2) revealed truth is a higher form of knowing than human reason.<sup>26</sup>

My thread closes with a unit on the Renaissance in which that phase of European history is treated more or less as the famous, though a bit outdated, European historian Jacob Burckhardt would: as the birthplace of the modern world. In HICC 101 we do not have time to enter the extensive and extremely complex terrain of the modern period, but we do bring our students to the brink of modernity by discussing such concepts as individualism, secularism, a rational view of politics, and embryonic ideas about what would become modern science. To complete our thread, I have chosen Pico della Mirandola's "Oration on the Dignity of Man," several pieces by Galileo Galilei, and one by Robert Cardinal Bellarmine. Pico's remarkable piece conveys beautifully the Renaissance notion that God has given man the capacity to become anything he wants to be: he can self-consciously shape his own nature and destiny. As the only creature to whom God has given the power of free will—even the angels are not so privileged—man can choose to become virtually anything he wants. It is clear that Pico thinks God expects a wise man to choose to cultivate the potential that lies within him to gain understanding through the exercise of his intellect. The decision, however, is man's alone to make. "From the moment of creation," Pico writes,

God bestowed [upon man] seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these a man shall cultivate, the same will mature and bear fruit in him. If vegetative, he will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God.<sup>27</sup>

From Galileo we have 1) an excerpt from *The Starry Messenger*, 2) his "Letter to Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany," and 3) the confession he made in the face of his condemnation by Tribunal of the Supreme Inquisition. From Cardinal Bellarmine, we have his "Letter to Paolo Foscarini." These pieces are all very interesting, and they allow us to open a window to the modern confrontation between science and religion. In *The Starry Messenger* Galileo illustrates and explains his astronomical findings, and in his confession we find him abjuring his findings under pressure of his inquisitors. Bellarmine's letter shows the Cardinal condemning the Copernican theory (which Galileo supports) on the grounds that it clashes with both Scripture and the 1000+ year-old tradition of scholarly interpretation. The most important of these pieces for our thread, however, is Galileo's letter to the Grand Duchess in which he asserts that a proper

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<sup>26</sup> The latter assertion was to me a bit of a surprise because I had thought scholastic thinkers such as Aquinas were committed to the proposition that logic is the best measure by which to gauge the validity of one's beliefs. I found it very interesting that even Aquinas took the essentially Platonic (and Augustinian) position that there are transcendent realities which are available to man only through divine guidance.

<sup>27</sup> Pico della Mirandola, "Oration on the Dignity of Man," p. 3.



reading of the Scriptures indicates that they were never intended to be taken as documentary evidence of scientific reality. Rather, God has given man the faculties of observation and reason, and His expectation is that man will use them in areas, such as science, that the Bible does not address directly. It is hard to imagine a text that could more effectively prepare our students for further coursework within a tradition that evolved dramatically as the Western world entered its modern phase, and I believe it is a fitting way to conclude my thread.<sup>28</sup>

The texts that are assigned and the topics that are covered in my sections of HICC 101 deal both intensively and broadly with important elements of the Catholic intellectual tradition as I have come to understand it over the past sixteen months. In our seminar readings and discussions we focused on some fundamental characteristics of that tradition. These include the idea that faith and reason are compatible and continuous, the notion that knowledge is integrative—all things are a reflection of God's work, and as we deepen our understanding of them we come closer to Him—and, in contrast to relativistic assumptions that often dominate the public discourse of our time, the assertion that truths exist which are absolute, rational, and divinely revealed. In designing my course I have tried to address each of these principles through the selection of readings, lecture material, and discussion topics that track the evolution of the tradition as it unfolded in time.

The final element of the Catholic intellectual tradition of which I am acutely conscious is the important role that higher education must play both in preserving and transmitting the "classic treasures" of the tradition and in bringing that tradition to life for our students. In designing my

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<sup>28</sup> Though I have done very little to explore this beyond the Renaissance, it is clear to me that the theme of the relationship between faith and reason has continued to be of major interest to Catholic thinkers up to the present. As I understand it, the mainstream Catholic position today is that since all of creation is the work of God it is impossible for reason and faith to contradict one another when they are pursued correctly to their ultimate conclusions—in the case of reason, when it is used rightly. The Church's position on science is that, as long as it does not transgress Christianity's fundamental moral teachings (as, for example, embryonic stem cell research does) science should be encouraged to flourish; confident that science will deepen our upstanding of God's creation and bring us closer to Him, the Church has no quarrel with science (as its enemies sometimes unfairly assert). That the Roman Catholic Church today is committed to that portion of its own tradition which affirms the value of human reason as a vehicle by which to arrive at truth—including those truths which the Church accepts as true by faith—has been demonstrated impressively by the Pope John Paul II, who in his important 1998 encyclical "Fides et Ratio" writes, "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth." "[The Church] sees in philosophy the way to come to know fundamental truths about human life. At the same time, the Church considers philosophy an indispensable help for a deeper understanding of faith and for communicating the truth of the Gospel to those who do not yet know it." Again, "What is distinctive in the biblical text is the conviction that there is a profound and indissoluble unity between the knowledge of reason and the knowledge of faith." (See Pope John Paul, II, "Fides et Ratio," Preface and sections 5 and 16.)

Last week I was reading some of the works of Thomas Merton in preparation for CCTEC's fall series ("Understanding the Tradition"), and I stumbled across the following passage that I think captures nicely the modern Catholic perspective on the compatibility of faith and reason. I believe it is worth quoting here in full: "Faith, without depending on reason for the slightest shred of justification, never contradicts reason and remains ever reasonable. Faith does not destroy reason, but fulfills it. Nevertheless, there must always remain a delicate balance between the two. Two extremes are to be avoided: credulity and skepticism, superstition and rationalism. If this balance is upset, if man relies too much on his five senses and on his reason when faith should be his teacher, then he enters into illusion. Or when, in defiance of reason, he gives the assent of his faith to a fallible authority, then too he falls into illusion. Reason is in fact the path to faith, and faith takes over when reason can say no more." See Thomas Merton, "Vision and Illusion," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell with an introduction by M. Scott Peck, revised edition (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 385.

course I have tried to remain faithful to this aspect of the university's mission. As I hope my summary makes clear, I have chosen what I think are seminal works within the tradition, and I have attempted to invite my students to engage them intentionally and directly.

So far, I would have to say that the results appear, in general, to be good. The scope of HICC 101 is enormous. Indeed, the course is essentially a survey of western civilization through the Renaissance, and it covers a huge amount of terrain. I believe, however, that my students appreciate the fact that by following an important thread and addressing essential questions their experience is more coherent than it otherwise might be. Also, I am convinced that by confronting and learning to extract meaning from primary texts, these students are acquiring habits of learning that are quite new to them. Though they may not fully appreciate it, they are becoming more sophisticated thinkers, and they are learning, one would hope, to teach themselves. Finally, of course, the content of the course, informed as it has been by my own evolving understanding of the Catholic intellectual tradition, is such that it requires students to think deeply about what it means to have inherited the three thousand year-old intellectual tradition that has done so much to shape our world. It seems to me that the value of this experience is hard to overstate, and I am deeply gratified that, with the help of what I have learned in the Presidential Seminar and elsewhere in the past several years, I have been able to bring such a course to my students.

### Postscript

I would like to add, as a final, brief note of reflection, that in my course I have my students read the second paragraph of the American Declaration of Independence. Although the text is beyond the scope of HICC 101 narrowly conceived, it enables me to highlight what I consider to be a significant weakness of classical Greek thought: its utter lack of a foundation for belief in the dignity of the individual and human rights. Despite the Platonic notion that absolute values exist, and in spite of the efforts of classical thinkers to search for ultimate meaning, none of the ancient world writers with whom I am familiar conceived the notion that all human beings share an essential humanity that dignifies their existence and entitles them to be treated with justice. Rather, as Aristotle argues in *Politics*, one must be a citizen, a member of a state, in order even to be considered human. In Aristotle's thinking, the state exists prior to the individual, who is considered fully human only when he is a participating member of a political community. If he is unable to live in society or has no need for social intercourse, he is not really human. As Aristotle puts it, "...he must be a beast or a god."<sup>29</sup>

To me, this is an astonishing statement. It makes it easier for us to understand the cruelty that ancient peoples often displayed in their dealings with outsiders. When the during the Peloponnesian War, for example, the leaders of an Athenian naval force warned the leaders of a small state (Melos) whom they intended to attack that it would not be in their interest to try to persuade their attackers on moral grounds not to harm, they responded by saying that, in Thucydides's famous quotation, "...right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must,"<sup>30</sup> When the

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<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, Chapter 2.

<sup>30</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Book 5, Chapter 17.

Athenian officers said this they were speaking in a manner that appears to be fully consistent with Aristotle's view of man. As liberal as the Athenians were at home, in their dealings with outsiders they were capable of great brutality, and they apparently felt no urge to justify their savagery in moral terms.

I think it is important that our students come to see the ancient world in this light because it allows them to begin to understand just how great a debt those of us who have inherited Western culture owe to the Hebrews. The authors of the Declaration of Independence wrote that it is "self-evident" that all men are created equal. Well, maybe. But is the principle of human equality really self-evident? When the founders wrote this, I wonder if they were forgetting the origin of the concept that underlies their most insightful statement of principle. Probably they were not, for the sentence that contains this expression continues with the assertion that the *Creator* [emphasis added] has endowed man with the unalienable rights that we and our students cherish (although we often take them for granted). Nevertheless, one might argue that to make such a cursory reference to as seminal a component of modern Western thought as the notion of the God-given dignity and freedom of the human person could induce us to overlook the profound contribution that Judeo-Christian belief has made to the Western mind.

As Pope John Paul II pointed out in *Fides et Ratio*, it is in the Scriptures that there emerges "a vision of man as *imago Dei*." It is a vision that "offers indications regarding man's life, his freedom, and the immortality of the human spirit."<sup>31</sup> I suspect that this vision is the true source of the concept of human liberty that is presented so concisely in the Declaration of Independence, and to bring this view to the attention of our students can establish the fact that Christian values are more relevant to their lives than they otherwise might think. It is one way to guide students toward a deeper understanding and appreciation of their Judeo-Christian heritage, and I find it a satisfying way to help Sacred Heart University fulfill its mission.

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<sup>31</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Section 80.