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Philosophy 101

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### Postmodernism and the Thomist Tradition

Postmodernism, defined as “a style and concept in the arts characterized by distrust of theories and ideologies” (Oxford), found its expression in philosophy as a rejection of theories based on objectivism. This deep skepticism poses a special problem for the realm of Christian philosophy, which has at its base the truth of an absolute and knowable reality. Tracey Rowland, in her book *Culture and The Thomist Tradition*, believes that she has found a way to reconcile the fundamental subjectivity of postmodernism and the liberal tradition with the necessary objectivism of Catholicism. In order to understand her argument, it is necessary to understand how, growing from the projectionist view of cognition, Rowland places herself among the postmodern theorists, and how she then subverts this subjectivity to make reality claims in favor of Catholicism. Once her position is understood, it can be evaluated in terms of the logical constraints of Christian philosophy. Does she independently come to her endorsement of Thomism, or does she allow herself to use Christian doctrine as a replacement for sound philosophical logic? I would argue that she does in fact rely too heavily on Christian ideas to make her argument, and in the end is unsuccessful in merging postmodernism with Catholicism.

Her theory starts by delineating two possible theological responses to the liberal tradition. The first, Whig Thomism, embraces the Enlightenment thinking which characterizes the liberal tradition, and believes it to be ultimately compatible with, and perhaps even the necessary evolution of, religious faith. Followers of Whig Thomism place the seeds of the liberal tradition in the writings of Aquinas, and believe that a synthesis of Catholicism and modern culture is possible. This belief is founded in part upon the idea that modernity is theologically neutral, and thus poses no threat to the Church. Rowland, however, disagrees with this position. Believing modernity to be inimical to the development and success of Catholic values, she places herself among what she calls the Augustinian Thomists, who see no possibility for success if the Church attempts to modernize itself by developing a shared ideology with the liberal tradition.

Rowland's objection to the modernization of the Church is based in part upon her belief in the expressionist view of language, which argues that language is inextricably linked to the culture in which it is used. The expressionist contends that an idea does not exist until it is expressed through language, and so is unique to that language, and hence that culture. This means that it is not possible to “distill doctrines from the tradition which embodies them and then represent them in the idiom of an alternative tradition . . . without in any way changing the meaning of the doctrine” (Rowland 121). To Rowland, the truth of this belief means the Church needs to acknowledge that it will not be possible to translate Catholicism into modern culture using the framework of the liberal tradition; any attempt to translate Catholic doctrine will alter the message beyond usefulness. In addition, the transposition of doctrine into liberal culture

necessitates that the tradition of the doctrine and Church is left behind. In its place is a reinvention of the Catholic tradition that is weak and impotent without the power of its history. Although Rowland argues otherwise, this school of thought stands contrary to the “implicit philosophy” promoted by John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio* as the common ground between all cultures; each culture exists without a common language or philosophy with which to communicate its ideas to other. For this reason, Rowland argues, it is not possible to convert people entrenched in the liberal tradition using modified Church language; instead they must be made to reject their own tradition and adopt the Thomist tradition wholesale.

Rowland, then, rejects the liberal tradition in its entirety, and thus must find a means to pull people from the liberal into the Thomist tradition without the use of a common cultural language. What is cross-cultural, she contends, and so can be used to bring an understanding of Catholicism to other cultures, is the need possessed by all peoples to strive toward rationality and wholeness, a condition she terms the 'integrity of the self.' The liberal tradition, as stated above, does not fulfill this need, and leaves those who embrace it fractured and dissatisfied. It is this kernel of dissatisfaction that Rowland believes offers a window for the Catholic tradition to reach in and pull people into its fold. Following the example set out by Alexander MacIntyre, people can, through a dialectic process, eliminate all traditions which do not foster integrity of the self. They will then be left only with the Thomist tradition. Indeed, Rowland makes the claim that the Thomist tradition “can be rationally demonstrated to be the only tradition which offers any hope for the formation of an integral self” (134). Rowland then takes this argument a step further, making that the singularly success of Thomism is “a very strong argument for . . . the truth of the tradition” (134), so that her model for the Church's reaction to liberalism becomes an intellectual defense of Christianity itself.

While this can seem an enticing argument for the benefits and validity of Thomism, there are several suppositions upon which it is based that are suspect. The crux of Rowland's argument is that it is possible to reach conclusions about not only the effectiveness of the Catholic tradition, but also its inherent truth, through both a logical rejection of other traditions and the consequent immersion in the Catholic tradition – that reason can inspire faith. Since Rowland's is a reason-based argument for faith, it must be evaluated for its ability to exist without suppositions based on faith and to stand separate from the Christianity it promotes. There are two parts of her argument where Rowland allows the end goal of the primacy of the Thomist tradition to act in place of reason.

The first of these is the supposition that a reasonable elimination of ineffective traditions will leave only Catholicism. The root of the problem with this supposition is her definition for an effective tradition – one that maintains an “integrity of the self.” Rowland is working from inside the Catholic tradition, and so is using its values to delineate the categories of success and failure. In short, she falls prey to her own belief in the degree to which “persons are influenced in their moral development by the culture of the community into which they have been born” (Rowland 1). She is basically using the ideals of her own tradition as a measuring stick for others, which clearly means they will fall short, since their values are not her own. Her argument takes for granted that the primacy of the values of the Catholic tradition will draw people to it. To this end, she offers a long and acute attack on the liberal tradition and the ways

in which it falls short of the values she is promoting. However, despite the power of this argument, she does nothing to follow that up with any stand-alone argument for the Thomist tradition. Instead, she only contends that because the others are wrong, hers must be right. It becomes a circular argument: Catholic values are the most effective, which means all other traditions will fall short, which proves that Catholic values are the most effective, etc. Given the basic inability of cultures to communicate effectively with each other, without having experienced all cultures, Rowland cannot make a claim as to which one is the best.

The second noticeable flaw in her logic is her assertion that the success of the Thomist tradition is suggestive of its veracity. This is the part of her argument where reason is supposed to give way to faith, where a “methodology that does not begin with the principles of Christian Revelation” (Rowland 134) nonetheless leads to a belief in their truthfulness. This truthfulness is supposed to spring from the Catholic tradition's unique ability to heal the self. There is no logical basis, however, for claiming that because something is helpful then it must be true; efficacy cannot be equated with veracity. If she is indeed promoting a kind of rationalism, in which the tenets of faith can be reached through reason alone, then this mis-logic creates a crucial missing link. If, as it seems more likely, she is promoting reason as only a road to faith, which is needed to complete an understanding of Christian Revelation, then her argument is acknowledging the necessity of a kind of intervention: reason based on what is the best for the self may lead a person to the Catholic tradition, but only faith can allow them to truly believe in its premises. She does not make clear which view she espouses, and so does little to explicate this stance.

In the end, Rowland is hampered by the beliefs upon which she bases her arguments. Professing herself to be a part of the Genealogical tradition, she criticizes the Church's refusal to acknowledge of the role of culture in the formation of the self and its relationship to theology, and herself acknowledges the inherent and possibly insurmountable difficulties in purveying the Church's messages into other cultures. Despite this barrier, she claims it is possible to come to embrace the Thomist tradition through a rational rejection of all other traditions, and thus to effectively leave one tradition for another. The test for this argument needs to be whether it is still valid after taking away its theological basis to see whether it can stand without the need to reference its Christian end game. Separated from its Catholic roots, her assertion that Thomism is the only workable tradition falls short: only one already imbued with and looking for Catholic values will find them so clearly in that tradition. Finally, her assertion that Thomism's success at maintaining an “integrity of the self” is an endorsement of its truth is, at its core, a faith-based argument. Reason may, however unlikely it may be due to culture barriers, bring a person to Thomism, but only faith can prove its truthfulness.

## Works Cited

Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oed.com/>

Rowland, Tracey. *Culture and The Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II*. Oxon: Routledge, 2003.