

THE LOCUTORIUM

BEGGING CULTURE

AN INTERVIEW WITH RÉMI BRAGUE

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In this issue of *Dominicana*, we especially wanted to examine the role of the preacher within the city. There seemed no better interlocutor with whom to discuss this subject than Rémi Brague, a world-renowned philosopher and historian of ideas. He has taught in numerous universities in Europe and the United States, and has received many awards for his work, including the the 2012 Ratzinger Prize for Theology, together with Brian Daley, S.J. He has also been named to l'Ordre National de la Légion d'honneur, the highest civic honor awarded by the French government.

I first met Professor Brague in college when, as a visiting professor, he taught a course on the development of the idea of Divine Providence. It influenced me a great deal. Furthermore, his works have been widely read, discussed, and enjoyed by the student brothers. Providentially, Professor Brague agreed to discuss the role of the preacher in the city with *Dominicana*.

First of all, thank you, Professor Brague, for agreeing to meet with Dominicana. It is an honor for us to have a philosopher like you in this edition.

Well, thank you. Barring any false modesty (and, for that matter, real modesty, too...), I'm afraid I'm more of a historian of ideas than a full-fledged philosopher. Or let us say that I am a philosopher who chose the mask of the history of ideas to put forward some ideas of his own. Furthermore, since you began with a kow-tow, let me follow suit and remind you that the honour goes both ways, since I am indebted to the thought and living example of several Dominicans whom I had the privilege to know personally: first of all, a total unknown, Fr. Raymond Fontaine (†1988), chaplain to a cloister of Dominican nuns on the remote outskirts of Paris. A genius for languages, he had learnt some fifteen of them (including Sanskrit, Arabic and Russian) and endeavoured to reduce them to their simplest form in order to make them more accessible to learners. He launched me into Hebrew.

Then, I should like to mention Frs. Marie-Joseph Le Guillou (†1990) and Jean-Miguel Garrigues, whose book *Le Mystère du Père. Foi des Apôtres, gnosés actuelles* (1973), written as an answer to the post-1968 events in the Church, deeply influenced my own world-view. I fear it never was translated into English. By the way, it so happened that I was bestowed the honour to proofread it before it went to the press...

One of my most admired and beloved friends was Fr. Guy Bedouelle (†2012), who taught Church History at the University of Fribourg. Most unfortunately, he died in his early seventies. Fr. Christoph Schönborn, whom I met for the first time in Paris shortly after May 1968, is, thank goodness, alive and kicking, as cardinal-archbishop of Vienna.

In the 20th Century, the role of Catholicism within philosophy was debated frequently. As a prominent philosopher and Catholic, how do you view the relationship between your philosophical work and your Catholic faith?



Rembrandt van Rijn — Philosopher Reading

One remembers the polemic begun in the 1930's about the validity of the phrase "Christian philosophy." Great minds took part in it, and first of all Etienne Gilson.

As for me, let me begin with a rather rock-bottom answer. Philosophy is a trade that one plies, the same way as one can be a dentist or a plumber. It behooves a Christian to be as good a practitioner of his or her job as possible, no matter what the job turns out to be. I prefer a good plumber to a bad philosopher, and I prefer a good agnostic philosopher to a bad Catholic one.

First, some words about what philosophy is all about. What singles out the philosopher is not intelligence. To be sure, it is better to be an intelligent philosopher, in the same way as you would choose an intelligent dentist or plumber rather than a dumb one. Intelligence helps, but it is not decisive. What *is*, at least in my opinion, is the ability to master one's anxiety and translate it into conceptual language, the capacity to abide by questions that are a challenge for everybody and for which nobody can possibly be a specialist.

Faith doesn't give us ready-made solutions for our problems. It rather adds problems to our ready-made solutions. This holds good for philosophic problems, too. Faith doesn't answer the questions asked by philosophy. Only philosophy can. To be sure, there is an ideological use of religion, as catering to this kind of easy answer, in exactly the same way as there is an ideological use of science, the latter being at least as devastating as the former. Leninism was an ideological use of political economy and sociology; Nazism was an ideological use of Darwinist biology. Philosophy and theology, which developed in a constant dialogue, are powerful antidotes against the ideological use of religion.

As for me, I am certainly no theologian. This is a form of knowledge that you can hardly potter about. You have to learn it, which I never did. I remained a mere amateur. As a believer, I receive from my faith challenges for my philosophical cast of mind, and conversely. Faith gives one new objects for him or her to think. As a philosopher, I find the content of Christian dogma interesting and challenging. For me, other religions, as far as I know them, are not.

In this issue of Dominicana, we are discussing the role of the preacher in the city. But first, please consider the reverse question. How have cities helped to shape the development of Christian thought?

This is a question for historians, and I am pretty confident that a Dominican historian would be well-suited to deal with it. As is well known, both mendicant orders are more often than not understood as an answer of sorts to the new phenomenon of the towns. They arose in the 11th century, when noble folk gave cities, led by merchants, letters of franchise. The fact that the Swiss city of Fribourg (i.e. “free town”) harbors an important Dominican university is fraught with a deep meaning. This huge historical movement was the first germinal cell of a real democracy, without slavery (unlike the so-called “democracy” of the Greek *polis*, in fact the rule of a thin elite of male slave-owners). And our present-day democratic mechanisms, like the election of the leaders by the majority on the basis of the principle “one man, one vote,” were invented in the chapters of the medieval mendicant orders. Which is the cradle of which is a moot point. The French philosopher Henri Bergson (†1941) wrote that “democracy is evangelical in essence,” thereby meaning “of the Gospels,” not the people whom we call now “evangelicals.” The modern phenomenon of the city is a remote consequence of a religion, i.e. the Christian religion, which addresses itself to free people as such: “Christ has freed us for freedom” (Gal. 5: 1).

In Christendom, one city has played a fundamental role. In your book Eccentric Culture, you argue that Rome has been instrumental in the forming of Western Culture. What role has the "Eternal City" played? How can it continue to shape society today?

Rome did play a decisive part in the development of Western intellectual and spiritual life. But it hasn't done that as a city, but rather as a cast of mind. In my *Eccentric Culture*, I tried to point out that Western Culture has its centers, or its points of

reference, outside of itself. The two cities that are commonly said, nay hackneyed, to be the sources of our culture, i.e. Athens and Jerusalem, don't belong to the European space. This is evident for the latter, and the former was not considered to belong to the "European" space earlier than the 19th century.

This "eccentricity" (in the most literal meaning of the word) was the practical aspect of a lesson that philosophy had been teaching for ages on the theoretical level, i.e. the non-identity of what is good and what is mine. In the course of its history, our culture never hesitated to borrow from other ones and hardly ever asked about the origin of the goods that it imported. It took over many inventions from China, like the compass, gunpowder, paper, or the horse-collar, because they were useful. It took over Aristotle and Avicenna, the former partly, the latter totally, from the Arabic world, because there was much sound knowledge in them. It took over china from, well...China, because it was more beautiful than common earthenware. In the same way, we should receive what comes from the outside on the sole criterion of its intrinsic worth, accept it whenever it has some value, reject it if it is worthless.

Since the time of the Desert Fathers, it has been common for Christians to flee the city in search of God. In some sense, men have fled from the authority of human laws to live solely by Divine law. What is the proper relationship between human and Divine laws for the Christian? And can Christians ever fully exist outside of human law?

Pope Benedict rightly emphasized the part played in European intellectual history by people who, like the monks, spent their time in *quaerere Deum*, looking for God. I was at the Collège des Bernardins when he gave his talk in September 2008, and I'm afraid the bulk of the higher Parisian intelligentsia, who had been invited to take part and listened politely, could hardly make heads or tails of what he was driving at.

Let me try and summarize how I understood the basic message: culture is a by-product. Things of great worth are almost always by-products, by the way, things you get by sheer serendipity. As an example: if you devote your whole energy to the “pursuit of happiness” as the goal to which everything else should be submitted, the odds are very much in favour of your being eternally dissatisfied. If, on the other hand, you simply do your duty as a husband or wife, as a professional person, as a citizen, etc., this will make you happy in the long run. Or, at the very least, to quote Kant, this will make you worthy of being happy.

In the same way, culture was not produced by people who wanted to do something cultural, or something to further culture. This may be one of the worst errors of our own time and age, and among the main causes of our cultural barrenness and lack of real style. Real culture was produced by people who wanted to praise the gods or the Creator, or even Nature. In another meaning than in the title of the book of mine which I quoted a while ago, culture is always “eccentric.” As for Christianity, I often use the example of Pope Gregory the Great (†604), who laid the foundation for the Middle Ages, thanks to many wholesome reforms, including the “Gregorian” chant. He created goods that were to last for more than a millennium. Now, he was convinced that civilization, and the whole nether world, would disappear shortly after him, the End being at hand. He never dreamed of building a “Christian culture”; he simply wanted to tidy up things before the last trumpet, in the same way as we sweep our house before leaving for holidays.

An interesting, albeit often overlooked, fact about Christianity is that it did not introduce new commandments. There is a Jewish law, the halakha; there is an Islamic law, the sharia; there is no such thing as a Christian law. A Christian has to behave according to common morality, such as it is expressed in the Ten Commandments, which, by the way, are hardly more than a summary of what C. S. Lewis, in his extraordinary *The Abolition of Man* (1943), called the Tao, deliberately choosing a non-Christian word better to express the universal character of

morality. The Counsels of perfection in Christian religious life don't replace the Commandments, Heaven forbid! They sort of take them more seriously and radically than the average believer.

Finally, what do you think the role of the preacher (or philosopher) is in the city today?

Putting together the preacher and the philosopher is, at first blush, a funny thing. Yet, on second thought, this makes a great deal of sense. If a philosopher contents him or herself with solving logical puzzles that trouble only the fellow-philosophers who are his or her colleagues, and leaves alone, i.e. in the lurch, their fellow-citizens, what is the use of philosophy? The philosopher must warn people, for instance by telling them what are the consequences of their behavior in the long run. On the other hand, philosophers should avoid any apocalyptic tone, especially the kind which is so beloved in the media. The best way to warn people may consist in dissipating whatever obfuscates the light of truth, i.e. confusion, lies, advertisement and propaganda of all ilk. Personally, I am profoundly moved by the parable once coined by the prophet Ezekiel (chs. 3 and 33): the sentinel will have to account for the death of the people if he failed to warn the city of the approach of the enemy. If they chose not to listen to his warnings, he will be innocent of their blood.

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