

Redemptive Reading and/as Theological Education in the Academy Today

Abstract: The spiritual pedagogy of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* demonstrates that the Christian hermeneutical *habitus* is to make the best of one's interlocutor as "redemptive reading," which far exceeds tolerance and surpasses even sympathetic reading. Aquinas graciously welcomes his objectors in genuine conversation because he appreciates how they help him understand his position more clearly. Redemptive reading initiates "text-based friendships" through the practice of well-wishing, empathy, and critical judgment. It engages theological educators in a prophetic act of resistance to the Weberian mode of "academic reading" dominant in higher education. Redemptive reading may therefore be a source of hope and/as theological education in the academy today.

Reading is the most commonplace task of universities. Universities are communities defined by reading. It is remarkable that this most basic skill remains largely unexamined. Granted, professors regularly consider *what* to read each time they construct a syllabus in advance of the new semester. The often contentious and protracted debates surrounding core curriculum reviews and "the canon" comprising foundational courses reveal deep-seated concern for reading content. Yet the question of *how* to read is often taken for granted. Reading is a stunningly overlooked pedagogical event. The assumption among the professionally literate that we are, is that we both know what reading is and how to do it. Paul Griffiths observes that "most of us have little or no idea what reading is, have never given its history much thought, and do not teach in institutions where instruction in it has a place."¹ This neglect is all the more problematic given social media's increasing influence on communicative habits within the academy.

This essay proposes "redemptive reading" as a spiritual discipline animating theological education for our time. I begin by describing redemptive reading as a Christian hermeneutical *habitus* practicing "text-based friendship."² It is characterized by well-wishing, empathy, and critical judgment. Redemptive reading highlights the central role of the theologian's spiritual life as conditioning one's speaking about God. I then argue that redemptive reading engages theological education in a practice of prophetic resistance to "academic reading" dominating the academy today. Redemptive reading may therefore be a source of hope for/as theological education in the academy today.

Aristotle on Well-Wishing

Aristotle's provides an enduring treatment of friendship in books VIII and IX of *The Nicomachean Ethics*.³ Friendship, for Aristotle, is an indispensable good. "Nobody would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other good things."⁴ Friends enhance our ability to

¹ Paul J. Griffiths, "Reading as a Spiritual Discipline" in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing

² The phrase "text-based friendship" originates in Randall S. Rosenberg, "Text-Based Friendships and the Quest for Transcendence in a Global-Consumerist Age" in *Grace and Friendship: Theological Essays in Honor of Fred Lawrence*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland and Jeremy D. Wilkins (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2016) 213-236.

³ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.1 1155a1-5.

think and act. Aristotle offers a friendship typology of pleasure, utility and virtue. Within this schema, perfect friendship, grounded in virtue, entails desiring the good of the friend for the friend's sake. "But in the case of a friend they say that one ought to wish him good for his own sake."⁵ Friendships of utility and pleasure are not friendships essentially but incidentally, because a person is not loved for what she is but for utility and pleasure.

Friendship's affective union accounts for the friend as "another self" (*alter ipse*). However, this identification with the other is not conflation or self-abnegation. Friendship of the good justifies self-love, "for we have said before that all friendly feelings for others are extensions of a man's feelings for himself."⁶ Well-wishing alone does not constitute friendship. "Good will resembles friendship but it is not identical with it, because goodwill can be felt towards people that one does not know, and without their knowledge, but friendship cannot."⁷ The sharing of concrete goods and deeds demonstrates the reciprocity of friendship loving. Friends naturally desire to live together, because they delight in being conscious of one another's existence as their mutual activity expands in conversation. In sum, Aristotle identifies friendship as mutual relations of benevolence motivated by concern for the other's good.⁸

Text-Based Friendship

Literary critic Wayne Booth extends the Aristotelian notion of well-wishing to include a reader's relationship with the author of a text.⁹ Booth contends that books offer different kinds of friendship, and the "company we keep" significantly informs who we are and who we become as readers. He laments the "modern neglect of friendship as a serious subject of inquiry" and the "decline of talking about books as friends."¹⁰ He calls texts "friendship offerings."¹¹ Booth echoes Aristotle: "The fullest friendship arises when two people offer each other not only pleasures or utilities but shared aspirations and loves of a kind that make life together worth having as an end in itself. These full friends love to be with each other because of the quality of the life they live during their time together."¹²

As is the case in "real life," discerning true textual friends can be difficult.¹³ "We reject these offers, of course, whether made by people or by fictions, unless we think we will get something worth having." We choose as our authentic friends only "those who persuade us that their offerings are genuine goods."¹⁴ Booth's vision of textual friendship entails both an ethical criticism and self-criticism. We discern among the "values of the moments" offered in a textual friendship while we simultaneously "judge ourselves as we judge the offer."¹⁵ We ask the text: "Do you my would-be friend, wish me well, or will you be the only one to profit if I join you?"¹⁶

Booth applies the golden rule to literary hermeneutics: "Read as you would have others read you; listen as you would have other listen to you."¹⁷ He avoids the extremes of Don Quixote's uncritical acceptance or an "anesthetic" reading that deflects the transformative power

⁵ Ibid., 8.2 1156a32.

⁶ Ibid., 9.8 1168b1-8.

⁷ Ibid., 9.5 1166b30-2.

⁸ Ibid., 8.2 1156a4-5.

⁹ Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Ibid., 171.

¹¹ Ibid., 174.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 178.

¹⁴ Ibid., 177.

¹⁵ Ibid., 178.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 172.

of fiction. Booth proposes “two-stage kind of reading, surrendering as fully as possible on every occasion, but then deliberately supplementing, correcting, or refining our experience with the most powerful ethical or ideological criticism we can imagine.”¹⁸

Redemptive Reading in Aquinas and Augustine

Given Booth’s vision, we may view Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* as exemplifying text-based friendship in a Christian light. The spiritual pedagogy of the *Summa* demonstrates that the Christian hermeneutical *habitus* is to presume the best in one’s interlocutor – as a kind of “redemptive reading.” The *modus operandi* in our day is to write and read in monologue. In contrast, the *Summa* incarnates the scholastic medieval culture of disputation (*quaestio disputata*), which draws divergent voices into conversation in a spirit of well-wishing. This preferred pedagogy of university curriculum was modeled on Socratic and Aristotelian methods of argumentation. Thus, Aquinas begins each question in each article by stating the position of his objectors. He graciously welcomes his objectors in genuine conversation, because he is grateful for the way that they help him understand his position more clearly. He doesn’t use the objectors as straw men. That he takes great care to address the concern of each objector in turn following his *respondio* demonstrates genuine well-wishing for his conversation partners. The friendly disposition animating the ongoing conversation in search of deeper understanding is grounded in the theological conviction that all existence is in some sense holy to the extent that it shares in a likeness with its Creator. Text-based friendship or redemptive reading may be understood as a Christian habit of reading in as much as the scholar is willing the good by trying to make the best out of the author’s work. The “Presupposition” to the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola* captures redemptive reading.

In order that both he who is giving the Spiritual Exercises, and he who is receiving them, may more help and benefit themselves, let it be presupposed that every good Christian is to be more ready to save his neighbor's proposition than to condemn it. If he cannot save it, let him inquire how he means it; and if he means it badly, let him correct him with charity. If that is not enough, let him seek all the suitable means to bring him to mean it well, and save himself.¹⁹

Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana (On Christian Teaching)* proposes the Matthean form of the twofold love commandment in the Synoptic Gospels – love of God and neighbor – as the metacriterion for proper interpretation. This transcritical approach to biblical interpretation as “no entrance to truth except through love” has been called a hermeneutics of love. We may view it as another proposal for redemptive reading. Augustine’s approach stands in sharp relief to the unchecked hermeneutics of suspicion dominating the academy today. He remarks on the interpretation of Scripture for the purpose of edifying the faithful:

Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them in such a way that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand at [the Scriptures] at all. Whoever finds a lesson there useful to the building of charity, even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended in that place, has not been deceived, nor is he lying in any way.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 280.

¹⁹ David J. Fleming, S.J., *Draw Me Into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises* (Institute of Jesuit Scholars, 1996), 18.

²⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, [De Doctrina Christiana] trans. D.W. Robertson Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 30.

The chief insight is that God's grace enables an interpreter to profit from reading a text even if that interpreter mistakes the author's "literal" which is to say intended meaning. The Christian problematic today is to welcome the most rigorous analytical and critical contemporary methods of biblical scholarship, exegesis and interpretation while simultaneously refusing the domination, abuse, or reductionism of biblical texts by sources themselves so that confessional or Christian approaches to scholarship remain credible.²¹

Redemptive reading includes critical judgment, as is the case in our friendships with one another. However, critical judgment is based in well-wishing following patient attentiveness and empathetic understanding. It is empirically verifiable by examining the contents of our own friendships that beginning with John Henry Newman's consent rather than Cartesian doubt leads to richer and deeper understandings of our interlocutors. This is not an abnegation of criticism or suspicion. On the contrary, we know from reflecting upon our interpersonal encounters that criticism is all the more powerful and cogent when it occurs following generosity based in attentiveness and understanding rather than when suspicion is the native stance of the encounter. Aquinas describes "fraternal correction" as an effect of charity, the consequence of living in friendship with God. Critical judgment is exercised after a prayerful examination intended to purify the rebuker's motives. Aquinas is acutely aware that rebuke is an event ripe for spiritual pride. The depth of Aquinas's counsel is summarized as he cites Augustine's words:

When we have to find fault with anyone, we should think whether we were never guilty of his sin; and then we must remember that we are men, and might have been guilty of it; or that we once had it on our conscience, but have it no longer: and then we should think ourselves that we are all weak, in order that our reproof may be the outcome, not of hatred, but of pity. But if we find that we are guilty of the same sin we must not rebuke him, but groan with him, and invite him to repent with us.²²

It is not difficult to imagine how the ethos of our political, religious, and academic discourse might be radically transformed if this counsel was interiorized in prayer or mindfulness prior to conversation with texts as with one another. Genuine friendship provides the humility, vulnerability, and trust necessary for giving and receiving fraternal correction as an act of charity. Redemptive reading is an alternative to tolerance, which is often non-engagement as peace keeping, when navigating various truth claims in a sea of pluralism. Healthy, robust dialogue and even conflict is vital to the development of a living tradition. However, social media displays a proclivity for denigration and dismissal that rules out empathetic disagreement. In contrast, redemptive reading offers critique as an expression of well-wishing when carried out in humility born from the self-awareness of one's own shortcomings and biases.

The Mutual Mediation of Empathy and Critique

Paul Lakeland identifies the twin intellectual virtues of critique and empathy as fundamental to the pursuit of academic excellence in church-related universities.²³ While critique abounds in the university, empathy is equally significant but often missing. For Lakeland, empathy is the first moment in a broadly phenomenological approach to academic inquiry. "The inquirer as *bricoleur* must let the object of inquiry show itself as it is."²⁴ The context-dependency

²¹ Jeff B. Pool, "No Entrance into Truth Except Through Love: Contributions from Augustine of Hippo to a Contemporary Christian Hermeneutics of Love," *Review and Expositor*, 101 (Fall 2004): 629-66.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 33, a. 5.

²³ Paul Lakeland, "The Habit of Empathy: Postmodernity and the Future of the Church-Related College," in *Professing in the Postmodern Academy: Faculty and the Future of Church-Related Colleges*, ed. Stephen R. Haynes, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 33-48.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

and historical awareness of knowledge in postmodernity has overruled the Kantian transcendental subject as neutral and omnipotent, but ever situated and limited. The habit of empathy precludes premature judgment that places the object of inquiry in a preapproved taxonomy, system, or metanarrative. Lakeland explains:

While eschewing sentimentality, the inquirer must in a real way *love* the object of inquiry; what is to be studied must be respected, allowed, as it were, to be itself. Only when this happens is there at least a fighting chance that critique or analysis will in fact reach the object of inquiry and not remain within the labyrinth of the inquirer's mental pathways. Empathy, in other words, is profoundly practical.²⁵

The essential precondition for genuine encounter is a willingness to listen while resisting the temptation to immediately locate what is said within one's own frame of reference or worldview. Lakeland adds that a habit of empathy is well suited for negotiating the mandate of religious ecumenism while remaining a witness to commitment of a particular religious perspective in the face of a postmodern tendency towards relativism and indifference. In friendship we imagine the other's good as our own; this exercise of empathy helps set the conditions for the possibility of authentic conversations. The etymology of empathy indicates a "feeling with" that crosses over to "be with" the other as the other simply "is." The mutual mediation of critique and empathy in Lakeland's account of faith-based higher education further enriches a description of redemptive reading.

Redemptive Reading as Witness in the Academy

Redemptive reading is a hermeneutical habit practicing well-wishing, empathy, and critical judgment. It draws upon the monastic ideal integrating knowledge and love. The social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* states: "Charity does not exclude knowledge, but rather requires, promotes, and animates it from within. Knowledge is never purely the work of the intellect... Intelligence and love are not in separate compartments: love is rich in intelligence and intelligence is full of love."²⁶ Theological educators engaged in redemptive reading provide hopeful witness to an alternative to "academic reading" dominating North Atlantic higher education today.²⁷

The standard mode of reading takes its cue from Max Weber's famous address "*Wissenschaft als Beruf*" (Academics as Vocation) delivered in 1918 at Munich University.²⁸ This lecture remains the *locus classicus* for understanding the academic vocation in our day. Weber spoke of "the fate of our time" which "is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and above all, by the *disenchantment of the world*."²⁹ The process of rationalization advanced by academic life meant that we could "in principle master all things by calculation."³⁰ In this light, ideal academic readers are technicians who have mastered the necessary linguistic skills to read what is before them. They prefer to work with the bounded and fixed text before them as an authoritative object to be mastered. "The printed text, designed as it is for easy and repeated reference, lies passively on the desk as a permanent possibility of rereading. The reader-technician flicks the pages back and forth to find in it what will serve her

²⁵ Ibid., 40.

²⁶ *Caritas in Veritate* 30, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html

²⁷ I am employing Paul Griffith's description of "academic reading" in "Reading as a Spiritual Discipline," 36-40.

²⁸ Max Weber, "Science as Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 129-56.

²⁹ Ibid., 155.

³⁰ Ibid., 139.

purposes as she reads and refers, using her technical tools to find what she needs.”³¹ The academic reader values speed and clarity above all.

The relation established in this mode of reading is the reader as the agent and the text as the patient. “The text lies supine before the reader, awaiting the exercise of intention and desire that only the reader can bring.”³² The book as an object becomes irrelevant once the act of reading is exhausted. At that point, the book is returned to the shelf. Moreover, the work read bears no implications on the life of the reader. Academic readers are solely focused on what can be mastered and understood by technical means. For Weber, the academic specialist renounces friendship-informed collaboration in the name of the academic’s solitary vocation. The academic reader, therefore, reads alone with the text in solitude.

Weber linked the notion of formal rationality to the doctrine of moral and religious relativism. He barred the academy from examining ultimate questions, because there is no academic justification for an answer to such questioning. Academic reading does not lead to God, beauty, happiness, or moral transformation. Academic readers must not adopt a position on value. In fact, to do so is to abandon their craft. The end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* depicts the personality of the worldly ascetic: “For the last state of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.’”

It should be clear by now that redemptive reading presents a prophetic alternative to the dominant Weberian model of academic reading. As hermeneutical, redemptive reading adverts to the educator’s basic existential stance when encountering the text. Fred Lawrence remarks: “What I *do* as a matter of fact when I read, understand, interpret, translate, etc. is intimately bound up with what I *am*.”³³ The central issue of theological education, then, is the theologian’s authenticity – which is not a theological skill to be mastered, but the product of ongoing intellectual, moral and religious conversion.³⁴ “In the end, knowing, like loving, is a kind of self-surrender, where the quality of the surrender cannot be disengaged from the quality of the self.”³⁵ In other words, theological education is a way of life – even while reading texts.

³¹ Griffiths, “Reading as a Spiritual Discipline,” 38.

³² Ibid.

³³ Frederick Lawrence, “Method and Theology as Hermeneutical,” in *Creativity and Method: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Matthew Lamb (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1981), 79-104, at 101.

³⁴ Walter E. Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Press, 2006).

³⁵ Jeremy D. Wilkins, ‘Our Conversation is in Heaven’: Conversation and/as Conversion in the Thought of Frederick Lawrence” in *Grace and Friendship*, 319-353, at 321.