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New Directions in Franciscan Studies

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Abstract: Since modern research on medieval thought first began to gather momentum in the late nineteenth century, scholars have held fast to a number of key assumptions about the Franciscan intellectual tradition, which was founded early in the thirteenth century and continues to flourish to this day. In recent years, groundbreaking research has increasingly called these assumptions into question, opening up new directions in the field of Franciscan studies for assessing long-neglected aspects of the Franciscan intellectual tradition and nuancing its supposed relationship to the ‘origins of modernity’.

Keywords: Franciscan, John Duns Scotus, modernity, Bonaventure, medieval Islamic theology

New Directions in Franciscan Studies

Since modern research on medieval thought first began to gather momentum in the late nineteenth century, scholars have held fast to a number of key assumptions about the Franciscan intellectual tradition, which was founded early in the thirteenth century and continues to flourish to this day. In particular, they have arrived at the consensus that Franciscans before John Duns Scotus (c. 1266-1308) were relatively unoriginal systematisers of the longstanding medieval intellectual tradition inaugurated by Augustine (354-430). By contrast, Scotus himself is believed to have broken with this tradition in ways that laid the foundation for the rise of modern philosophy and theology, and even politics, economics, and science.

In recent years, groundbreaking research has increasingly called these assumptions into question, opening up new directions in the field of Franciscan studies for assessing the mass of neglected material that pre-dates Scotus and for rethinking or at least nuancing his relationship to the ‘origins of modernity’. In what follows, I will sketch some of these new directions. As a preliminary to this effort, however, I will start by providing a bit of background to the study of Franciscan thought, elaborating on the factors that have helped further the consensus described above. Next, I will discuss some recent research, including my own, which has cast doubt on this consensus. In this context, I will provide a few examples from Franciscan thought that problematise the reigning consensus. This discussion will lead naturally into a final section, which will highlight some key areas in the field that merit further exploration.

Background to Franciscan Studies

The Franciscan order was founded in 1209 by Francis of Assisi—one of the most charismatic religious leaders of all time—who called his followers to a life of absolute poverty and service to the poor. Within 20 years of its founding, by which time the order had grown to include around 5,000 mostly lay members, leaders within the order realized the need to establish an intellectual tradition that would provide a basis for training novices and legitimize Franciscan participation in the young universities of Paris and Oxford, as was quickly becoming essential to obtaining intellectual credibility with the laity of the day.¹

Under the supervision of Alexander of Hales (1185-1245), who is often credited as the founder of the Franciscan school, the first Franciscan university masters worked together to author a theological and philosophical Summa, which was one of the first Summae to be written in the period that became known for them, and

which was completed 20 years before Thomas Aquinas even began to compose his magisterial *Summa Theologiae*. This massive *Summa Halensis* or *Summa fratris Alexandri* ('Summa of Brother Alexander') as it is variously called provided a basis, at least through the thirteenth century, for the academic training of Franciscans, including Alexander's prize student Bonaventure (1221-74), as well as his successor John Duns Scotus.

According to the standard scholarly narrative, Bonaventure gave mature expression to the tradition he inherited from his teachers and is therefore regarded as the prime representative of the early Franciscan school, that is, the school as it developed before Scotus. On observing the affinity of Bonaventure and his teachers for quoting Augustine, therefore, scholars have consistently drawn the conclusion that members of the early school were fundamentally Augustinian thinkers, whose primary concern was to codify Augustine's longstanding intellectual tradition and thereby re-assert his authority at a time when Aristotle's recently re-discovered major works were rapidly rising in popularity.²

By contrast, as already noted, scholars have generally believed that Franciscan academics working later in the thirteenth century, above all, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham (c. 1287-1347), finally recognized the Augustinian worldview of their Franciscan predecessors as outmoded, and departed from or at least significantly revised it in ways that laid the foundation for the later development of modern thought, particularly in the fields of theology and of philosophy. As the alleged inaugurators of the so-called *via moderna* and the first genuinely innovative Franciscan thinkers, Scotus and Ockham as well as their successors have received considerable scholarly attention throughout the modern period, not least when it comes to identifying continuities between medieval and modern thought.³

By contrast, the work of the early Franciscan school has been very little studied, with the limited exception of Bonaventure, who nevertheless remains vastly under-researched by comparison to a medieval giant like Thomas Aquinas. After all, he is merely the most mature representative of what is otherwise an unoriginal 'Augustinian' tradition, at least in the standard and still popular opinion.⁴ On this assumption, scholars have almost completely neglected the copious works of Bonaventure's teachers, including Alexander of Hales, John of La Rochelle, and the other possible authors of the *Summa Halensis*. After completing critical editions of Bonaventure (1902), the *Summa Halensis* (1924-48), and Alexander of Hales' major works (1951-60), they largely abandoned the project of editing these works, which can only be consulted in manuscript form.⁵

Another reason for the neglect of *Summa* in particular concerns the difficulties involved in determining exactly which early Franciscan authored which section of the text, though reasonably strong conclusions can be drawn in this regard.⁶ Although the questions surrounding authorship do not negate its status as an indicator of the 'collective mind' of the early Franciscan school, scholars have shied away from this text nonetheless, as a result of an excessive and one might say distinctly modern preoccupation with the questions of authorship. Thus, the early school remains virtually un-investigated by comparison to many other areas of medieval research.

Recent Research

In recent years, the research I have undertaken has begun to disclose reasons to doubt the assumption that the later Franciscan school represents a wholly innovative break from an earlier, unoriginal tradition. In this connection, it has

exposed and problematised a scholarly tendency to read scholastic, including Franciscan, texts at face value, that is, to presume that quotations to an authority like Augustine entail a sort of slavish allegiance to his views. While quotations from Augustine represent around a quarter of the quotations in the *Summa Halensis*, to say nothing of other key Franciscan writings, this was far from unusual at the time.⁷ The Sentences of Peter Lombard and the writings of other medieval thinkers like Hugh of St Victor also include a disproportionate number of citations to Augustine.

After all, this was a time in which it was standard practice to develop arguments in conversation with Augustine, as well as a wide range of other authorities. In that light, the much more interesting question to pose to any scholastic text concerns the way scholars employed authorities. As soon as we examine their writings with more than just a glance, we can immediately see that they exhibit almost no concern for the accuracy or consistency of their quotations. The point of reading authoritative sources was clearly not to interpret Augustine or any other figure on his own terms but purposefully to show that different readings of can be taken on different points and ultimately to develop one's own often wholly original account of the matter under consideration. As one scholar summarises, this was a period when 'everyone could use the tradition as he chose.'⁸ For this reason, it is far too simplistic to say that the first Franciscans simply followed Augustine. They worked with their own ends in mind.

As my past research has established, moreover, those ends were very much informed by the religious order in which ideas were developed.⁹ Since most theologians and philosophers during the high scholastic period were members of a religious order with a specific charter and agenda, this should come as no surprise. In the case of the first Franciscan scholars, who worked from the 1230s, the goal in the wake of Francis' death in 1228 was give expression in theological and philosophical form to the 'little poor man's' unique spiritual and ministerial vision, thereby making it possible to pass that vision on to new generations of Franciscan novices and indeed to lend legitimacy to Franciscan participation in university life.¹⁰ As this vision was wholly original, their efforts could not help but result in the creation of a totally unprecedented intellectual tradition, which was codified in the *Summa Halensis*.

In the effort to translate Francis' charismatic persona into an intellectual 'system', the Franciscans followed the trend of their times and 'cherry-picked' from a vast range of sources to develop their own views. While they quoted Augustine in some cases, an examination of those cases reveals that they were generally far from providing a mono-dimensional reading of him. As the great medievalist Etienne Gilson noted long ago, they exhibited a marked tendency, among others, to 'project' ideas from the Arab scholar Avicenna on to quotations from Augustine. Although this period is normally seen as one concerned with the appropriation of Aristotle, Dag Hasse has highlighted that until the 1250s and 60s and thus in the period of the *Summa's* authorship (1236-45; with final sections completed as late as 1255/6), many of Aristotle's major works had yet to appear in trustworthy translations.

By contrast, the works of Avicenna were readily available in superb translations; while these works appeared under the same titles as Aristotle's works, they were not mere commentaries but developed their own original perspectives. Although Gilson supposed those perspectives to be compatible with the project of 'systematizing' Augustine, a more nuanced reading, such as Dag Hasse has offered, reveals them to be highly conducive to the Franciscan project of 'translating' Francis' example into a theological and philosophical system.¹¹ When the Franciscans quote Augustine, consequently, it normally bears comparing their reading to the relevant

texts of Avicenna to determine the evident parallels that can be drawn. Some examples may prove helpful here.

Examples from Franciscan Thought

In a treatise on how we know God in the *Summa Halensis*, the authors of the Summa quote a negligible number of other sources in favor of providing 70 quotations from Augustine, 34 of which are to his *ep. 147 (De videndo Dei)*, 31 to other works like *De libero arbitrio*, *De Genesi ad litteram*, *De vera religione*, *De Trinitate*, and *Soliloquia*, and 5 to pseudo-Augustinian works, such as *De spiritu et anima*, which were believed to be authentic at the time.¹² At the decisive point in the argument, the Summa cites chapter 13 of this spurious work, which distinguishes between superior and inferior parts of reason, which are also mentioned in some of Augustine's authentic works. 'The superior part is ordered towards the contemplation of God and eternal things, and the inferior part is for the contemplation of creatures and temporal things.'¹³

According to the Summa's reading of this text, the knowledge of God is innately implanted in the superior reason in the human mind. Although it is impossible to know God by inferior reason alone, God can be known through creatures, which reflect him in different ways, when inferior reason is informed by superior reason. Furthermore, he may be known in himself through reflection upon the innate knowledge of him that can be found precisely there. If the mind fails to access this knowledge, whether of God himself or of creatures, it is because of a stubborn will, which becomes preoccupied with the objects of inferior reason and thereby becomes ignorant of the knowledge of God implanted in superior reason. By repenting before God of this sin, and thus through the softening of the will out of love for God, however, the mind may regain access to the knowledge that is always there.

Although attributed to Augustine, this quite idiosyncratic interpretation of the way higher and lower reason co-operate was originally a product of Avicenna.¹⁴ According to Avicenna, higher reason, or the theoretical face of the soul is turned upwards toward the realm of universal forms, while the practical face is turned downwards. It uses the universals acquired by the theoretical faculty to deal with matters pertaining to bodily life. For this purpose, the higher reason is innately impressed with certain transcendental concepts, above all, that of Being—or God—which presupposes true understanding of all beings as creatures of God. Rather than providing the content of knowledge of those beings, the innate concept of Being regulates the mind's efforts to render experiences of them intelligible, thus ensuring that correct ideas about them are formed, that is, ideas corresponding to God's own.

This is precisely the account of knowledge that the Summa implicitly invokes in the question on the knowledge of God and develops further in other treatises, including its treatise on the rational soul. On my argument, the decision to project it on to Augustine was a strategic move made by Franciscans seeking to legitimize on the terms of Christian tradition a particular manner of experiencing God and the world which was familiar to Francis, if outlined by Avicenna. As many hagiographic texts testify, the saint enjoyed a constant, intuitive connection with God—here explained in terms of the innate knowledge of the 'Being' of God—which in turn made it possible to gain immediate insight into the meaning and value of all things, great and small.¹⁵

Whereas early Franciscans manipulated quotations from Augustine to their own ends in many cases, there are other quite significant instances in which they depart from him completely. In the case of the doctrine of God, for instance, they

replace Augustine's emphasis on 'simplicity' as the fundamental feature of the divine nature with an emphasis on divine infinity.¹⁶ Although they find a way around implying that the doctrine of divine infinity promotes a concept of God as wholly other only in 'quantitative' rather than 'qualitative' terms, this doctrine nonetheless lays an exceptionally strong emphasis on the continuities between finite creatures and God, who is the sum total of all possible and actual finite beings. In this way, it allowed Franciscans following Francis to lay a special stress upon God's individual knowledge of and love for creatures—a love Francis sought to emulate.

The Franciscan doctrine of the Trinity further elaborates Francis' unique understanding of the nature of God's love. Abandoning the longstanding tradition of Augustinian Trinitarian theology, Franciscans like Alexander turned to the more recent doctrine of Richard of St Victor and adopted it as their own. For his part, Augustine took a psychological model as the foundation for his understanding of the Trinity. On this model, the Father as first knower communicates himself to the Son, who is not only known by but also knows the Father. In turn, their knowledge of one another indicates a desire to know or love for the other that consists in the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

By contrast, Richard proposes a communitarian or social model that bears obvious signs of a Greek Trinitarian influence, although Richard does uphold the crucial Latin doctrine of the *filioque*, that is, the procession of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son.¹⁸ At the start of his discussion, Richard insists that God as the supreme good must be a God of love, since no being that is supremely good would withhold its goodness from another—or withhold love. Since love must be aimed at another, Richard concludes that there must be at least two persons in God.¹⁹

On the assumption that the love of the first two persons must be the same in its nature, intensity and direction in order to achieve perfection, Richard concludes that perfect love consists in a 'shared love' on the part of the Father and Son for a third person, who is the full expression of their love.²⁰ While the first person is a 'monarchical' figure as in the Greek East who is characterized by a purely gratuitous or self-giving love for the Son and Spirit, consequently, the second both receives love from the Father and gives it in the Spirit; finally, the third simply stands as the object and complete reflection of divine love.

In adopting this account of the Trinity, early Franciscans emphasized the absolutely self-emptying or self-sacrificial nature of God's love, paradigmatically expressed in Christ, which Franciscans sought to emulate through their own vows of complete poverty. Furthermore, they gave an account of the inner relations amongst the persons, which, when extrapolated for the doctrine of creation, made it possible to describe all creatures as perfect and complete, albeit finite, reflections of God's love, in a manner analogous to the Spirit, that deserve our service and care.

Indeed, the Franciscan doctrine of God whether as one or as Triune had many profound implications for Franciscan views on other matters, for instance, what it means to be created in the image of God, to lose the image through sin, and to regain it through the redemptive work of Christ. In that sense, the radical departure from Augustine at this initial level could not help but generate further deviations down the line, which must be investigated even in cases where Augustine continues to be quoted. As we have seen in the example from Avicenna, those quotations do not ordinarily indicate allegiance to Augustine but are a means of developing unique doctrines, which are often informed by other, even Arabic sources, that were ultimately consistent with the theology of the Franciscan order, and in turn the religious vision of Francis.

New Directions in Franciscan Studies

What, then, are the implications of the above analysis for the future of Franciscan studies? At an initial level, I have charted a new course for methodology in the field of Franciscan and medieval studies more generally by exposing some of the idiosyncrasies of the scholastic method of using sources, and especially the tendency of scholastic authors to manipulate sources for the ends of a particular religious party or agenda. In doing this, I have highlighted the innovativeness of early Franciscan thought and challenged the longstanding view that this school is insignificant. By these means, I have brought into focus the vast range of texts associated with the school, which have scarcely been studied and in many cases not even critically edited. In sum, I have gestured towards the monumental research and editorial task that awaits the current and further generations of scholars, even while providing the methodological resources to undertake it.

This task comes into relief as all the more important when we consider the continuities between the early and later Franciscan schools, which the exposure of the early school's novelty brings to light. As new research on the early school uncovers ideas that have generally been attributed to later Franciscans, the thesis becomes increasingly untenable that Duns Scotus and his successors simply broke from their Franciscan predecessors to follow a previously uncharted *via moderna*, in which philosophy became autonomous from theology, such that reason gave way to rationalism and faith to fideism. Rather, a much more nuanced picture emerges in which Scotus and others at and after his time worked very much within the boundaries of the tradition originally outlined by the likes of Alexander of Hales, even while drawing out some of its logical corollaries further than any Franciscan had done before them.

In this connection, my analysis above has also hinted, Scotus and later medieval Franciscans continued to function within a distinctly Franciscan religious environment. Although their growing enmeshment in university life did have a tendency to render the religious quality of Franciscan ideals less evident as time went on, studying the work of their predecessors highlights clearly the specific and important spiritual and ministerial objectives that underlay the development of Franciscan thought. Naturally, those were not the ends of modern and increasingly secular thought.

Although it may therefore be possible to conduct a genealogy of modernity which traces how originally Franciscan ideas entered the stream of modern thought and took on a life of their own, the decontextualisation this entails renders untenable any direct linking of Franciscan and modern thought which would render Franciscans somehow 'responsible' for modernity and especially its alleged ills, including secularisation, resulting from the bifurcation of faith and reason, excessive individualism, not only in religious matters but also in society as a whole. When their ideas are interpreted as intended through the lens of Francis' persona and mission, in fact it may turn out that the Franciscans themselves have much to offer in terms of a counterbalance to such trends. But in an academic environment where so much criticism has been levelled against them, this is an area that remains completely open to exploration.

Notes

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- ¹ Neslihan Senocak, *The Poor and the Perfect: The Rise of Learning in the Franciscan Order 1209-1310* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2012).
- ² Franz Ehrle was one of the first explicitly to label early Franciscans ‘neo-Augustinians’ in *Grundsätzliches zur Charakteristik der neueren und neuesten Scholastik* (Freibourg en Brisgau: Herder, 1918). The renowned medievalist Etienne Gilson furthered this reading in many works, including his *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* ((New York: Random House, 1922; trans. 1955).
- ³ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (MIT Press, 1985) Olivier Boulnois, *Être et représentation: Une généalogie de la métaphysique moderne à l'époque de Duns Scot* (Paris: PUF, 1999). Michael Allen Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Catherine Pickstock, ‘Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance’ *Modern Theology* 21 (2006), pp. 543-74.
- ⁴ Christopher Cullen, *Bonaventure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- ⁵ *Magistri Alexandri de Hales Glossa in quatuor libros Sententiarum Petri Lombardi* (Quaracchi 1951-7). *Magistri Alexandri de Hales Quaestiones disputatae "Antequam esset frater"* (Quaracchi 1960).
- ⁶ See two important articles on this topic by one of the editors of the *Summa Halensis*, Victorin Doucet, ‘A New Source of the *Summa Fratris Alexandri*, *Franciscan Studies* 6 (1946), pp. 403–417; Victorin Doucet, ‘The History of the Problem of the Summa’, *Franciscan Studies* 7 (1947), pp. 26-41, 274-312.
- ⁷ *Doctoris irrefragabilis Alexandri de Hales Ordinis minorum Summa theologica (SH)* (Quaracchi 1924-48). The Prolegomena to volume III, section IV indicates that the Summa contains 4,814 explicit and 1,372 implicit quotations to Augustine, which amounts to more than one quarter of the texts cited.
- ⁸ Jacques-Guy Bougerol, ‘The Church Fathers and *Auctoritates* in Scholastic Theology to Bonaventure’, in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, ed. Irena Backus (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 289-335, p. 289.
- ⁹ Lydia Schumacher, *Divine Illumination: The History and Future of Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
- ¹⁰ C. H. Lawrence, *The Friars: The Impact of the Early Mendicant Movement on Western Society* (London: Longman, 1994).
- ¹¹ Dag. N. Hasse, *Avicenna’s De Anima in the Latin West* (London: The Warburg Institute, 2000).
- ¹² *SH*, Vol. 1, ‘De Cognitione Dei in Via’, Membrum I, Caput 1, Pro 1, p. 15.
- ¹³ *SH*, Vol. 1, ‘De Cognitione Dei in Via’, Membrum II, Caput 4, Respondeo, p. 28: ‘*Superior pars est ad contemplandum Deum et aeterna, inferior ad contemplandas creaturas et temporalia. Ad superiorem pertinet sapientia, ad inferiorem scientia.*’
- ¹⁴ F. Rahman, *Avicenna’s Psychology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 32-3ff. See also Lydia Schumacher, *Divine Illumination: The History and Future of Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 90-100.
- ¹⁵ See the writings and hagiographies of Francis in Marion A. Habig, Paul J. Oligny, Leo Sherley-Price (ed. and trans.), *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St Francis* (Franciscan Press, 1983).
- ¹⁶ Meldon C. Wass, *The Infinite God and the ‘Summa fratris Alexandri’* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1964).
- ¹⁷ Augustine, *De Trinitate (trin.)* 5; Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Augustine, *trin.* 8.10.

¹⁹ Richard of St Victor, *De Trinitate*, trans. Ruben Angelici (Eugene: Cascade, 2011). III.II, p. 116.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, *DT* III.XIX, p. 132.