St Bonaventure: Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christian Educators

What does 13th century Bonaventure have to say to 21st century teachers?

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The word ‘medieval’ is sometimes used negatively to suggest an attitude or practice that is crude, primitive, naïve, superstitious, irrational and cruel. Yet, as French philosopher Rémi Brague reminds us, ‘medieval people were exactly as smart and as stupid, as benighted and as enlightened, as generous and as wicked, as we are now’ (Brague, 2019, p.5). He helpfully identifies what distinguishes medieval and modern thinking: the notions of providence and project. With providence we rely upon God and depend on God as our measure; with the project, we seek to control the world and define our own yardsticks (Brague, pp.13, 14).

One advantage of revisiting the medieval worldview, faced with the fragmentation of academic disciplines, constantly being differentiated into ever more tightly prescribed and specialised sub-disciplines, the loss of confidence in any metanarratives that explain our place in the world, the frequent assumption that there can be a disconnection between academic work and any particular moral tradition, and the erosion of trust in any possibility of our attaining truth - is to learn from its strong sense of the coherence, integrity and harmony of creation, its conviction that there is an objective order to be found in the world and its assumption of there being a necessary connection between, on the one hand, our moral character and spiritual state and, on the other hand, the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of our cognitive reach. Bonaventure assimilates all academic disciplines into the life of discipleship. He steers between an unwarranted confidence in reason and our natural powers and a disabling distrust of these. For him, of course, we do need grace but should recognize that grace builds on as well as perfects nature; grace does not ignore or bypass our efforts; indeed, it supposes them. Thus his task was to hold together Assisi and Paris, faith and reason, devotion and intellect, the divine and the human dimensions of life. Personal and intellectual integration requires an appreciation of the plurality and multi-dimensionality in creation and in humanity, but also an ordering and unifying principle. Rigorous study conducted with the illumination of faith could give access to the richness and diversity of the world as well as provide the key to seeing how it all fits together.

Bonaventure set out to demonstrate the essential harmony between the life of faith, as outlined by Francis, and intellectual engagement in university studies. He took seriously the injunction in Matthew 22: 37: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ He promoted a form of learning that embraced all three dimensions: affective, spiritual and intellectual. He turns the academic journey – the search for knowledge – into a spiritual journey – an encounter with God. Both involve rigour and desire. Academic work, for Bonaventure, can make a legitimate and valuable contribution to spiritual discipline.

In all his writings, at the forefront are questions about our origin, our purpose and our destiny. Where have we come from? What are we here for? Where are we headed? To find the answer to these questions we must come to know Christ as the key to understanding both the cosmos and our personal lives. For anyone involved in Christian education and seeking to hold together the tasks of teaching, the balancing acts of leadership, and the challenges of deepening and witnessing to one’s discipleship, Bonaventure can be a fine resource from which to draw.
For the purposes of this paper, I am not going to provide a textual analysis. For that you will need to read the chapter from which this short paper is drawn. Rather I am simply going to identify some educational implications of Bonaventure’s writings, based on three of his works, each of which casts light on the purposes and essential features of Christian education. These are, first, The Soul’s Journey into God, his most frequently quoted piece of writing, composed in 1259; this locates our intellectual journey within a cosmological and spiritual context. Second, I rely on an earlier and much shorter treatise (written in 1254), On Reducing the Arts to Theology; this constitutes a valuable contribution to our understanding of how the diverse forms of knowledge cohere together, if properly contextualised. Third, I extract a few points from Bonaventure’s last work, a series of lectures given in 1273, his Collations on the six days of creation or the Hexaemeron. This brings out some essential qualities required for any serious study of creation.

A key theme for Bonaventure is that true knowledge requires as a precondition that we conform ourselves to Christ. We resist today the notion of conformity because it seems to threaten our individuality and authenticity. But for Bonaventure, not to be conformed to Christ was to be out of sync with reality and to fail to have one’s faculties operating with their full potential. It would be to regard oneself and other creatures in a false light. Conformity to Christ has both a spiritual/devotional dimension and the requirement of virtue – this is counter-cultural in the face of much thinking about the world of academia today. Conformity to Christ will serve to align our thinking with God’s purposes in creation.

What can Christian teachers in schools learn from Bonaventure? First, knowledge separated from relation to God is incomplete and precarious. Second, given that our best picture of God and of how human beings can relate to God comes through familiarity with the person of Jesus Christ, any school which claims to be Christian in inspiration must be Christ-centred. For Bonaventure, Christ is the fulfilment of the potential that lies at the heart of creation (union with God) and he is the goal to which creation is directed. Delio (2013b, p.169) proposes that ‘We might say that Christ becomes the fullness of the universe when each of us lives in the fullness of Christ.’ If Jesus of Nazareth stands at the centre of reality, then ‘any attempt to understand man and his world without that centre is doomed to frustration’ (Hayes, 1992, p.21). A third principle follows from these two, namely that Christian teachers should strive for an integration, in themselves and their students, of spirituality and scholarship.

From these foundations there follow three implications for the curriculum. First, every effort (by individual staff and by them all collaboratively) should be given to promote interconnectedness in the curriculum. As Hayes (1992, p.31) points out, ‘no science stands in isolation; all the arts and sciences of man – if they are true to the reality of the world – must finally be seen within the totality of things and in their relation to the unifying Word of God in which all reality finds its final intelligibility.’

Second, a truly Christian curriculum goes well beyond the provision of Religious Education, the opportunity for occasional worship, and the supportive ambience of pastoral care in a hospitable community, important as all these are. It must embrace a holistic and coherent approach to the full range of knowledge, seen in the light of the Gospel – history, science, art, literature, sport and all other curriculum areas.
Third, the ethical implications of knowledge should be brought out. Here I am referring to two ethical aspects, the second of which is often entirely ignored at all levels in education. There is nothing controversial in suggesting that students should be encouraged to question the uses that people put the knowledge derived from science, technology and the diversity of human inventions. What is their impact on humanity and the planet? Who is gaining and losing from their deployment? Can we find ways to use what we know to enhance human flourishing and the common good, instead of seeking to establish merely personal advantage from our learning? Are teachers orienting students towards serving those in need? Are they fostering a concern for the environment? What is less likely to receive attention is the role played by the virtues in coming to knowledge in the first place; here Bonaventure provides a jolt, welcome or not. ‘Like a book written in a foreign language, Bonaventure states, creation became illegible because the human mind, clouded by sin, became enveloped in darkness’ (Delio, 2013b, p.62). Therefore, moral education and formation in the virtues, together with training in prayer, are all essential aids to coming to recognize, to welcome and to embrace the truth. Humility and gratitude are not often included as necessary dispositions for learning.

There are also several implications for pedagogy if one embraces Bonaventure’s educational vision. First, the role of affections in learning is not to be neglected. Second, there is a need to respect, to invite and to encourage into speech and to listen carefully to each student (and colleague) because, as Delio (2013b, p.72) observes ‘Just as the Word is the expressed “image” of the Father, the human person is created to be an expressed “image” of the Word. We might say that God utters each of us like a word containing a partial thought of himself. And when that word is spoken in and through our lives, God is made visible in the world.’ Third, for the teacher, as well as for the student, knowledge as mastery is less important than knowledge as receptivity. In contrast to our grab and hold society, where materialism rules, our faith strangely tells us that letting go is a necessary step for receiving – and learning. If, according to Bonaventure, ‘the highest wisdom … is pure preparedness to receive the divine impress’ (LaNave, 2005, p.184), then in the exercise of authority in the classroom the teacher should cultivate his or her capacity to listen carefully to each student, both in order to learn from them and so that she can more effectively meet their needs - for one of the ways God speaks to the teacher is through the voices (and also via the unspoken communication) of students.

Bonaventure sets the bar high for teachers, when he comments on four essential features of the firm and stable faith they need to display: certain knowledge, outstanding reputation, harmony among them and strong conviction (Hex. 9.9). They must know well what they are to teach. Their lifestyle and example must be such as to mirror the truth they represent and seek to share, thereby making it attractive to and resonate within their students. There must be harmony and evident collaboration between teachers; disagreement, divisiveness, petty disputes and lack of cooperation undermine the effectiveness of their conjoined witness before students. The fourth quality, strength of conviction, Bonaventure points out (Hex. 9.27), must be permeated by love, prepared to endure suffering (for example, disappointment at lack of success, opposition, recalcitrant students, lack of recognition by others) for God’s sake and exuding an inner joy in serving God in this work.

As for the fourth implication for pedagogy, LaNave (2013, p.106) brings out an interesting and perhaps surprising feature in Bonaventure’s thinking when explaining how, for Bonaventure, ‘The magister [teacher] who would be a theologian must strike a balance between his proper
subordination to and humility in the face of the authorities and the need for his theology to be his own.’ If we apply this to the role of RE teachers, it suggests that they are to be more than merely mouthpieces for the church, that they need to have internalised the content of their teaching, made it their own and enlivened it with the peculiar and particular flavour and tone of their own lived experience, so that it comes across as genuinely theirs, not someone else’s pre-ordained script. It is difficult to see how teachers can promote authenticity, agency and personal transformation in their students if they have not exercised such agency and creativity in their own appropriation of the faith. Such ownership, appropriation, internalisation and agency are, of course, desirable in all teachers and as a goal for all students in all disciplines of the curriculum; they are not relevant only for RE teachers. The most effective teachers are those who live out and put into practice what they teach, demonstrating the powerful difference for good it has already made and continues to make in their own lives.

Bonaventure’s vision enhances our regard for education, because it sets this noble endeavour within the context of developing our capacity to reach out to and to rest in God. The coherence of his thinking poses a challenge to common ways of approaching knowledge and learning. First, in contrast to our tendency to analyse, to break things down into their smallest parts and then to reduce everything to the rules operating at this lowest level, as if, for example, my chemistry decides everything for me, and that the viewpoint from which we can establish the best perspective is our own, Bonaventure’s faith-infused outlook tells us that things don’t make sense on their own; parts only make sense in the light of the whole to which they belong. Only a sense of the best makes possible our judgements about the lesser. So, until we allow ourselves to come face to face with the bigger picture, our judgements are incomplete and shaky at best. Second, in contrast to our tendency to think of learning as being head-stuff, of confusing information with knowledge and of separating learning from the rest of life and from our lifestyle, Bonaventure reminds us that learning is addressed to the whole person, with all our parts, and that it depends on all our parts being activated and interactive with one another, and brought together by attending to God, from whom they came. Third, instead of relegating morality and spirituality to a private and purely optional realm, disconnected from intellectual pursuits, Bonaventure presents the view that we won’t come to worthwhile knowledge without living justly, if we do not treat our neighbours fairly; in this view, our access to knowledge and our ability to benefit from it are closely connected to the quality of our lives and our openness to God and to the bigger picture through prayer.

REFERENCES