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Dante: Cafeteria Catholic?

Ronald B. Herzman

“Cafeteria Catholic”: A Roman Catholic who chooses to follow whatever idea or prohibition they choose at his/her own discretion.

“Cafeteria Catholic”: A Catholic who chooses to follow the correct doctrines of the Catholic Church, and chooses not to follow the pretty much ridiculous ones.

—From the Urban Dictionary

So what happens after time travel finally becomes a reality and our favorite figures from the past are now able to make random guest appearances in the present? I fantasize the University of Notre Dame taking advantage of this opportunity to offer an honorary degree to Dante, and for good measure—since Dante was a pretty good wordsmith—making him their commencement speaker as well. At first glance, it makes a good deal of sense for a number of reasons: the world’s most high-profile Catholic university honoring and being honored by the world’s greatest Catholic poet. Even more (*anzi*, as Dante would have put it), Notre Dame has been in the process of expanding its already impressively large Italian Studies program, a program with a huge Dante component. What a boost that would give to the enterprise. Dante at Notre Dame: a match made in *Paradiso*.

A match, one might add, that would be a welcome relief after the controversy swirling around President Obama’s appearance at Notre Dame as commencement speaker and honorary degree recipient in 2009. Nobody would be in the audience yelling “baby killer” as Dante strides up to the podium. Here is someone who is both high profile (at least in my circles) and not controversial. And as an extra bonus, ceremonial academic regalia in the twenty-first century are practically indistinguishable from Dante’s default outfits in the fourteenth. He would clearly look right at home during the ceremony, and the university wouldn’t have to pay for a rental gown

(although no doubt some of the faculty marching in the procession and eyeing Dante's headgear, that great pointy hat festooned with laurel leaves, would be stricken with acute hat envy). Who could possibly object?

Who indeed? The ruckus might have begun with a small rumbling from the Catholic League, which objected to Notre Dame's choice on the grounds that Dante, author of the *Divine Comedy*, so clearly scornful of Church authority, showed himself to be nothing short of sacrilegious when he had the temerity to put popes in hell. Whatever his reasons may have been in the fourteenth century, what kind of message does this send to those who are so eager to defame the popes of our own time—like those, for example, who on such flimsy evidence are so willing to condemn “our beloved Pius XII, of sainted memory”?¹ The league called for an investigation and asked a number of bishops who are generally sympathetic to their views to take up their cause: to intervene, to object, and perhaps even to demand that Notre Dame withdraw its invitation. The more they investigated, the more they uncovered. What kind of a message is Dante sending when he has homosexual sinners and heterosexual sinners cavorting with each other—kissing each other, no less—as they repent their sins on the final terrace in purgatory? What kind of repentance is that? What kind of message does that send out about the sacredness of the family? And while the bishops did not come right out and condemn Dante for this, they asked (“merely as a question, you understand”): What kind of message is he sending when his guide for two thirds of the poem is a pagan?

And so it began. Once the debate got going, it fed on itself, blew up to something huge and ugly, and no one was able to find any easy way to resolve the issue. If Dante gets to have his say at Notre Dame, the event won't be without hecklers, without impassioned letters to the editor and to the president of Notre Dame about the impropriety of the choice, or without select bishops fuming against the secularity of this once-great Catholic university. There are some who are even calling Dante the “C word”: “He is nothing but a Cafeteria Catholic.”

Back to reality: Many years ago, my friend and colleague Bill Cook and I were giving some lectures on Dante at a Trappist monastery in Georgia. One of the monks there—a hermit, no less—took me aside to tell me, with a slight but unmistakable hint of unmonastic pride in his voice, that he reads the *Divine Comedy* cover to cover every year during Lent. “Where else,” he said, “can you find the entire faith laid out in front of you with such clarity and power?” At the time he said it to me, it sounded true, though I probably did not know enough about either Dante or the Catholic Christian intellectual tradition to affirm or deny his assertion. I'm quite sure I still don't. But thinking about this good monk's Lenten practice many years later, I have from time to time asked myself what sort of evidence I might provide in support of it. That is to say, what kind of case would I construct if I were to provide an inventory of my own? Wherein does Dante's exemplary status as an embodiment of the Catholic Christian tradition reside?

My own experience in trying to figure out what Dante is all about has had a lot to do with seeing his interface with many of the true giants of the Western Chris-

tian tradition. To learn how Dante uses Augustine's *Confessions* as the model for the *Commedia*'s merging the epic tradition with the tradition of spiritual autobiography, I needed to learn more about Augustine. To learn how Francis of Assisi becomes a model and a guide for Dante the about-to-be exile, I had to learn more about Francis. And so on down a long list of figures: Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Pseudo-Dionysius, Benedict. . . . To say the obvious, the more I learned about these figures, the more I learned about Dante. But the relationship between Dante and the giants of tradition is reciprocal: One comes to know Dante better as one assimilates the tradition, but one also comes to know and understand the tradition better through reading Dante. I began to see that the more I came to know about Dante, the more he had to tell me about the tradition that he had assimilated. That is to say, I first began to intuit and then began to see it fleshed out that if one wanted a profound encounter with Augustine, or Francis, or Thomas Aquinas, or—one could make this a very long list—Dante would be an extraordinarily trustworthy guide, a wonderful entry into their world, a magisterial teacher who both sees and transmits to his readers what is central to their vision. Dante, simply put, is a remarkably astute reader, judge, and synthesizer. In this way, I can best translate the hermit-monk's appropriation of Dante into something that makes a lot of sense to me. Dante is in this sense, as the hermit-monk proclaimed, a "summa" of the Catholic Christian tradition.

Let me flesh this out a little bit in the case of Francis of Assisi, a figure with whom I have spent a good deal of time both inside and outside the orbit of Dante. In Canto 11 of *Paradiso*, no less a figure than Thomas Aquinas, who is Dante the Pilgrim's master of ceremonies in the Heaven of the Sun, clarifies a point that he had made earlier about the need for Church reform by presenting an eighty-line biography of Francis. Robert Hollander, a usually sober and measured critic, one certainly not known for gushing, says the following about this Franciscan episode in the extensive notes to his edition of the poem: "Dante has outdone himself. . . . Dante's addition to existing Franciscan material is spectacularly original in its reworking of the basic narrative found in Bonaventure and others."² Hollander articulates here a perception that many other Dantists share but that has gone largely unnoticed by Franciscan scholars: namely, that Dante is a good place to go to learn something about the depth of the Franciscan moment.³ Dante's portrait of Francis draws on a number of sources, chiefly the life of Francis written by the greatest of the Franciscan theologian/philosophers, St. Bonaventure, but it is not precisely like any of them. It is a brilliant model of compression and synthesis of a great many sources that is both deeply traditional and startlingly fresh and original. Dante has managed to capture the tenderness of the *Poverello* and at the same time articulates the theological meaning of his life. In Dante's version Francis is the apocalyptic Francis of Bonaventure, the angel of the sixth seal, a rising sun bearing the seal of the living God, the herald of a new age, a figure of *renovatio* for the Church. Dante's Francis is the cosmological Francis of the "Cantic of the Creatures," bringing into play Francis's own most famous and most important writing and linking that Francis with the Platonized Christian cosmology that structures the *Paradiso*.⁴ It is a portrait that is at once both

homey and mystical, and in his treatment of Francis's marriage to Lady Poverty, Dante is both brilliant and subtle, highlighting poverty as both a key to understanding Francis and, more radically, a key to understanding all of Christian history. In the process of so delineating Francis, he also lays the groundwork for his scathing indictment of the wealth and corruption of the Church in his own time, an indictment that permeates the entire *Commedia*. We need to hold onto that understanding of who Francis is. In this instance, at least, it seems as though orthodox Dante and the prophetic/critical Dante can't easily be separated from each other.

Another major figure in the tradition and in the *Commedia* in whom that same paradox is embodied is Bernard of Clairvaux. If he is not the same compelling figure as Francis of Assisi, if he is not as well known in our own time as he was in the fourteenth century, or indeed in his own time (1090–1153), the fault is not Dante's, since he has made Bernard his third and final guide in the *Divine Comedy*. Dante had good reasons for doing so. He saw in Bernard a quintessential role model for what he aspired to, the goal of the *Commedia*, which is nothing less than the direct encounter with the Ineffable, which constitutes the final lines of the poem. The twelfth-century Cistercian was considered an impeccable spokesman, perhaps *the* spokesman for the contemplative tradition, his eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs arguably the most important document in embodying the movement toward God that constitutes the Western medieval Christian mystical tradition.⁵ Dante knew what he was doing when he made Bernard his guide for the final approach: Bernard knew the territory. But Bernard was also a role model for Dante in many other ways as well. He was a theologian whose medium was poetry, and Dante pays homage to that aspect of Bernard by allowing him to present, in his own voice, the exquisite hymn to the virgin that begins the final canto of the *Commedia*, a hymn that is in some ways a summary of the whole of *Paradiso*. Bernard was also a crusader of sorts.⁶ Though he did not himself take part in the Second Crusade, an unlikely but not impossible role for a contemplative monk in the Middle Ages, Bernard exhorted others to do so in the most emphatic terms. The Second Crusade was launched in no small part as a result of Bernard's preaching. The story has it that while preaching at Vezelay in 1147, he worked up such a fever for the crusade that men began to cut crusaders' badges out of available cloth to put on themselves; when the cloth ran out, Bernard took off his habit so that more badges could be made.

The crusade was a disaster, and Bernard in his later writings was forced to come to grips with its failure. For Bernard, this meant refocusing his attention to the spiritual ideal of a crusade as a journey toward inner transformation. This aspect of Bernard is hardly insignificant for Dante; in *Paradiso*, Dante learns from his great-great-grandfather Cacciaguida, who died while participating in the First Crusade, that he too must become a crusader, albeit with the pen rather than with the sword. So here too Bernard serves as a role model. In learning to spiritualize the very meaning of a crusade, as Dante the Pilgrim does in the Heaven of Mars when he is given a kind of battlefield commission to exercise his prophetic pen by his great-great-grandfather, he is imitating Bernard.⁷ To all these roles, and to others as well, must be added the

fact that Bernard was a severe critic of the institutional Church. Among his most important works, he wrote *Five Books on Consideration*, cast in the form of a letter of advice to a former pupil of his, a monk who has since become Pope Eugenius II. Jean Leclercq, perhaps Bernard's most important interpreter in modern times, has said of this treatise that it is "the most virulent attack against the Roman curia ever written."⁸

Those of us who are Dante groupies might beg to differ with Leclercq's choice, but however the work is positioned, it anticipates with great specificity Dante's critique of the papacy in its neglect of its spiritual mission and in its assimilation of temporal concerns and temporal power. In *Inferno* 19, the canto of the simoniac popes—popes guilty of buying and selling Church offices—Dante describes the same evils, quotes many of the same biblical texts, and uses much of the same language as Bernard did almost two centuries earlier. No one has ever accused Bernard of being a Cafeteria Catholic. Bernard is a figure about whom it might be said with some justification that he was more Catholic than the pope. One significant difference between Bernard and Dante is that Bernard was writing as a monk and insider, using his position as the pope's former mentor and superior as a powerful rhetorical ploy to defuse the seeming presumption implicit in criticizing the visible head of Western Christendom and thus to deflect potential criticism. Dante by contrast is both a layman and an exile, an outsider twice over. But however much that difference might highlight the gutsiness of Dante's assault, the fact is that Bernard provides a model for Dante that reminds us that prophetic denunciation is part of an ongoing tradition that goes back to the Hebrew prophets, a tradition that allows Dante too—the Dante whose very exile was due to his opposition to a pope—to consider himself no less than Bernard as someone writing from within the Church as one of its most loyal sons, rather than as an outsider looking in. Moreover, the contours of Bernard's work speak to Dante in another way as well. *On Consideration* is much more than a prophetic critique that happens to have been written by a contemplative. It is a prophetic critique that is also a contemplative text, a work that interweaves action and contemplation, exactly as Bernard did throughout his own life, exactly as Dante is attempting to do in the *Commedia*. As part of a carefully articulated strategy, the two most notable contemplatives that Dante the Pilgrim meets in the Heaven of Saturn in the *Paradiso*, St. Benedict and St. Peter Damian, are not only notable Church reformers, they are presented to the Pilgrim in their role as Church reformers, figures whose contemplative lives gave them the necessary perspective and the requisite authority in their reform of the Church. They too, as Bernard does, provide the Pilgrim with role models for the top-to-bottom reform of the Church that Dante is asked to proclaim by no less than St. Peter himself a little later on in the *Paradiso*. Book V of *On Consideration*, a consideration of "those things which are above us," is in point of fact one of the key contemplative texts in the entire Bernardine corpus, and exhibits many of the same qualities as his more obviously contemplative texts such as his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. It is exactly to the point, for Bernard and for Dante, that the two—the prophetic and the contemplative—cannot be separated.

Dante's appropriation of these two iconic figures of the Western Christian tradition, Francis of Assisi and Bernard of Clairvaux, is instructive: He sees them both as models of orthodoxy and daringly subversive prophets of reform. It is perhaps the case then that those who want to make Dante the poster boy for orthodoxy often have a kind of predetermined and perhaps too narrow view of what that orthodoxy might mean. There is a recent trend in Dante studies, by way of contrast, that treats his theology with the utmost seriousness, simultaneously emphasizing how extraordinarily daring and challenging Dante's theology really is. In a thoughtful and wide-ranging introduction to his translation of Dante's *Paradiso*, Robin Kirkpatrick presents some useful ways to think about the theology that informs the *Paradiso*: "We should not expect of the *Paradiso*," he tells us, "merely a record of theological belief in the Middle Ages, but a reinterpretation or rediscovery of Christian belief, bearing the stamp of Dante's own intellectual interests, and equally, displaying an emotional and imaginative response to the specific issues that have engaged his interest throughout the *Commedia*."⁹ And again:

The *Paradiso*, then, should not be viewed (as it sometimes is) as a series of dutiful sermons or devout rehearsals of received ideas. Rather, it is an intellectually impassioned search for coherence, and in that sense, it is perhaps the most deeply personal of all three *cantiche* of the *Commedia*. Yet it is an essential part of faith to recognize that coherence is not the product of any single mind, or even of humanity at large, but a gift of God which displays itself in many voices other than one's own. The *Paradiso* is therefore also a profoundly joyous recognition of a multitude of voices that conjoin and collaborate (as Dante represents them) with the poet's own in exploring and declaring, as they unfold, the life as well as the doctrine of Christian belief.¹⁰

There is much to ponder in this description. Because there is such a multitude of theological voices in the *Commedia* and in the *Paradiso* particularly, it is important to remind ourselves of the danger of taking any one voice as somehow the most representative, the most essential summary of where the poet stands. There is a huge resurgence of interest in the theological implications of the *Commedia*, but a great deal of that interest is concerned with exploring the intersection of poetry and theology, along with the recognition of just how daring Dante's particular version of the marriage of theology to poetry actually is.¹¹ Those who want to see Dante as a poster child for orthodoxy—or for heterodoxy, for that matter—usually have a predetermined view of what such a position might entail, and then go about showing how Dante fits or does not fit into it. It begs the question, assuming that we already know what we mean when we use the terms *orthodoxy* and *heterodoxy*. It also makes an implicit assumption that the poem is accurately read as a series of propositions that can be taken as proof texts.

Dante's poem, on the contrary, helps us to figure out what the terms mean, always forcing us to see that they mean more than we think they mean. The poem constantly and relentlessly pushes us to go beyond where we thought we were. Dante shows us how propositions are a useful tool, in some sense a useful starting point, but

they are valuable only to the extent that they lead us deeper into mystery—which is to say, they are paths that provide a direction. Dante’s poem presents, among other things, a model for transformation in which the Pilgrim’s journey, a model for the journey of the reader, embodies and imagines continually new ways of seeing. One can never stop and say, OK, here it is, here is what it means to be orthodox (or conversely, here is what it means to be a rebel); to read Dante this way would be a kind of idolatry, taking propositional language or the propositions embedded in that language as the end of the journey rather than as a guide for the journey. Orthodoxy is not an end. It is a means to an end.

Let us go back for a minute to the “multitude of voices” that constitute the poem and look at them from a particular angle. If nothing else is obvious from the fact that Dante’s guide for two thirds of the poem is Virgil, Dante’s encounter with the classical and pagan past is massively insistent throughout the poem. We need to pay very close attention to the fact that so many of the voices that Dante listens to, assimilates, re-creates, repositions, reinterprets, and responds to are pagan voices. Virgil’s is simply the most obvious, but there are so many that one needs to take into account what this might mean from a theological perspective—that is to say, from the perspective of orthodoxy. We need, for example, to ponder the implications of the fact that in Christian hell, in the *Inferno* that Dante creates, the categories—the major division of sins into incontinence, violence, and fraud—are not Christian in origin but are ultimately derived from Plato’s conception of the virtues. Virgil may leave Dante as an official guide in *Paradiso*, but Dante’s dependency on classical sources, present throughout, continues through the final third of the poem: The conspicuous frequent allusions to the poetry of Ovid is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the final canticle. Aristotle is called “the master of those who know” early on in the poem (*Inferno* 4.132), and his thought too is massively present in the way that Dante thinks and organizes. Dante thus actively participates in the debate over the value of explicitly non-Christian knowledge to a Christian, a debate almost as old as Christianity itself, a debate whose parameters were formulated at the end of the second century by the North African Latin Church Father Tertullian, who famously asked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” It is a debate that resurfaces in every era of Christian history. It is also a debate that gets to the heart of the issues in this essay because it helps define and clarify two very different views, two very different positions, about the very meaning of orthodoxy.

In order to see what is at issue here, I would like to take a brief detour and look at the way the debate played itself out somewhere between Dante’s time and our own: in China in the 16th century. In his insightful survey *The Story of Christianity*, the Orthodox (that is to say, Eastern Orthodox) theologian David Bentley Hart writes the following:

And the Jesuit missionaries in China that began in 1582 were originally models of peaceful intellectual and cultural exchange in large part because the most remarkable

missionaries to China—Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607)—wished to aid in the creation of a genuinely Chinese Christianity, in harmony with the native forms of piety and philosophy, and as untainted by “Europeanism” as possible. Ricci was especially drawn to Confucianism (the dominant tradition among the rich and educated) through which he believed that divine truth had made itself known to the Chinese from ancient times. Ruggieri, by contrast, was drawn to Taoism (which flourished more among persons of lower estate) and believed that it was principally under the form of the Tao that a knowledge of God’s eternal *Logos* had entered China. This difference occasionally caused tension between the two men’s converts, but both Ricci and Ruggieri passionately believed in the presence of a “primordial revelation” in Chinese tradition, and that the philosophical and spiritual riches of that tradition might one day—as had once happened with the traditions of Greece and Rome—be assumed into a new cultural synthesis.¹²

What is at stake here is perhaps more subtle than might first appear. The analogy with the traditions of Greece and Rome that Hart makes at the end of this quote, the very traditions that Dante explores and exploits to an unparalleled degree in the *Commedia*, might serve as a reminder that what seems obvious and inevitable in retrospect—the incorporation of classical modes of thought and expression into Christianity—was both problematic and daring at the time. And for good reasons. The incorporation of so much of the classical patrimony into Christianity took away the easy assurance that we know and have always known what we mean when we speak of Christian mysteries, that they are somehow locked in to what we already know, because classical modes of thought were called into service in the very formulation of these mysteries. It is easier to see the shock waves such a synthesis could have produced by focusing on the relatively unknown territory of China: Ricci and Ruggieri are not simply claiming that there are certain non-Christian (in this case Chinese) truths that are compatible with Christianity and can therefore be used as a starting point to Christianize a non-Christian culture. The full logic of their position is more fundamental than that. It was already brought out in that earlier debate over the usefulness of the classical tradition.

One of the most important contributions to that debate is that of St. Augustine in Book 7 of the *Confessions*. There, he describes the shock of recognition that comes to him in his reading of the Platonist philosophers, when he discovers in them basic truths of Christianity. He makes the daring claim that the reading of these texts was an absolutely necessary if not sufficient step in his own conversion to Christianity. Augustine is thus proposing that bringing the truths of another culture into dialogue with Christianity not only provides someone coming to Christianity with an easier access to understanding what Christianity is all about, by analogies and ideas from his own culture; these truths also expand the understanding of Christianity for those who are already inside its tent, showing Christianity itself to be something larger and more comprehensive than had previously been experienced. Once the Platonists have been accepted, Greek philosophy opens up a wider and more comprehensive understanding of Christian mysteries than was previously available. It takes an en-

counter with the other to tell us who we are, to see things about us that we could not see for ourselves. Thus, getting back to the examples of Ricci and Ruggieri, it is not simply Confucian culture or Taoist culture that is changed in the process of being Christianized. It is Christian culture as well. This is indeed a daring position, and it is not without meaning for this study that the positions of Ricci and Ruggieri were rejected a century later in a series of papal decrees, promulgated under the influence of Franciscan and Dominican missionaries “who saw such rites as inherently heathen, idolatrous, and even demonic.”¹³

Dante’s exceedingly open, generous, and generative construal of this question puts him in line with Origen, with the Augustine of the *Confessions*, with Thomas Aquinas, and with key figures in the Byzantine tradition; and it pits him squarely against Tertullian (the second-century North African presbyter who first formulated the question), against many of the Protestant reformers, against many strands of conservative Catholic and Protestant factions today, and surely against all strands of fundamentalist Christianity today. Depending on where one stands in this debate, one has a very different answer to the question of what it means to be orthodox. Where Dante stands is clear. Orthodoxy demands that we constantly look for better ways to get the answer.

Polemics over the question of orthodoxy today suggest that it is possible to be more Catholic than the pope. It is very interesting to note that Dante has had some surprising allies in modern times, or at least surprising if we remind ourselves that, at least by percentage, the profession that was most likely to land one in Dante’s hell was pope. Indeed, if one takes into account the fact that only one pope can occupy the chair of St. Peter at a time, popes have an astonishingly bad track record in the *Divine Comedy*. This fact notwithstanding, popes in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have really liked Dante. Indeed, external evidence that might be cited for the orthodoxy of Dante is the good press he has received from the Vatican in no fewer than two popes Benedict. Pope Benedict XV honored Dante with his very own encyclical letter, *In Praeclara Summorum*, promulgated on April 30, 1921; more recently Benedict XVI (pope from 2005–2013) honored Dante by citing the *Commedia*, more specifically the ending of *Paradiso*, as a key source for his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. I keep wanting to say: Haven’t you guys been paying attention? Look at how Dante has returned the favor. The actual words of the earlier Benedict are about as complimentary as it can get. Benedict XV states: “[I]t has seemed most opportune to Us to speak to you all, beloved children, to show even more clearly than before the intimate union of Dante with this chair of Peter, and how the praises showered on that distinguished name necessarily redound in no small measure to the honour of the Catholic Church.”¹⁴

How does Benedict’s encomium, and more important his presenting Dante as a kind of papal champion, mesh with the fact that there are more popes who are damned in Dante’s *Comedy* than who are saved? However disconcerting, there is nothing that is especially unorthodox about Dante’s decision-making process from a strictly theological perspective: Christian tradition has been clear that one is not

saved by the office one holds, however exalted. Holders of any office, even the highest, are not thereby excused from their sins. Looking back at it from a distance of seven hundred years, one might be tempted to say no more than that Dante had good taste in popes. There is a sense, in other words, in which the encyclical gets it exactly right: To the extent that the chair of Peter has the capacity to absorb the prophetic denunciations of a fourteenth-century Jeremiah and to use that denunciation as an opportunity for self-criticism, the Catholic Church is indeed honored by the praises showered on Dante.

But a close reading of the encyclical would not present much evidence that this is what Benedict XV had in mind; he does not seem to be responding with either this level of engagement or this level of understanding. More likely the encyclical is to some extent the playing out of a scenario articulated by Christian Moevs in his important study of Dante's metaphysics: "That in our time the *Comedy* (at least in Italy) is the glory of Catholic literature does not mean that it is better understood, but probably that it is less understood: its revelatory challenge has been defused and accommodated within convention and accepted ideas."¹⁵

As a kind of gloss to Moevs's appraisal, it is interesting to observe that in his encyclical, Benedict XV quotes as frequently from Dante's *Monarchy* as he does from the *Commedia*. Given the scathing indictment of papal theory, papal prerogatives, and papal practices in the *Monarchy*, not to mention the fact that the *Monarchy*—unlike the *Commedia*—has had a long and distinguished career on the Catholic index of forbidden books, one cannot help but think that Benedict's citations are selective enough to be best understood as an "accommodation" in the sense that Moevs is using the word, which is to say they do not come to terms with anything like the full frontal assault that Dante is making on the spiritual crisis of his own time, and by extension on a complacent institutional Christianity of any time, whether in the *Monarchy* or in the *Commedia*.¹⁶ I would argue that Dante is orthodox to the very degree that he is subversive—at least, subversive in terms of "a complacent institutional Christianity."

I think it is fair to say that at least some of the force of the original impact Dante's attitude toward the papacy might be recaptured if we imagine the numbers and kinds of people who would be coming after Dante if he were our contemporary and tried to pull a stunt like that: suggesting that more popes are damned than are saved, and using the texts of the popes of the latter half of the twentieth century as his proof. One might want to argue that the papacy has cleaned up its act in recent times. Whatever one thinks of, let us say, the issues swirling around the papacy of Pius XII with respect to his putative accommodations with Nazism, or of the various scandals coming to light in the latter stages John Paul II's reign, a time when ecclesiastical approbation, not to say aid and comfort, was given to perpetrators of some pretty horrendous deeds, not many would want to say that these were not men of genuine personal piety. Would that have tilted the balance for Dante in the other direction, so that they would be like the figure of the emperor Constantine, whose place in Paradise comes in spite of the huge damage his actions caused? (See *Paradiso*,

20.55–59.) Who can say? Certainly there are those of us who would want Dante to come back if for no other reason than to design an appropriately apt infernal punishment for those members of the Catholic hierarchy who knowingly participated in the cover-up of the child abuse by priests that remains a terrible scandal in the Church today. Who better?

A useful parallel to the singularity of Dante can be found in the career of Thomas Merton, the prolific Cistercian monk who has, appropriately for this study, been compared by Jean Leclercq to his twelfth-century monastic predecessor Bernard of Clairvaux. Merton is someone who is recognized as one of the great spiritual masters of the twentieth century, even as he has been regarded with great suspicion in certain quarters. As Dante spoke from the margins of exile, Merton spent much time not only speaking from but also reaffirming his marginal position as a monk. One of the most useful studies of Merton's project, as Merton himself understood it, is that of his former student and fellow Cistercian monk John Eudes Bamberger.¹⁷ A very brief synopsis of his take on Merton suggests some useful and appropriate comparisons with Dante, to demonstrate how his career provides a parallel to Dante and the *Commedia*.

Bamberger shows how Merton's reaction to the Latin theological manuals that formed the basis of theological study for the monks in his order was to respond with a different kind of logic,

the logic of symbolism, of experience, of life itself. Such a manner of organizing material and thinking can seem very tidy and even invalid to those formed in a more technical and scientific world. . . . The more literary, contemplative approach of the patristic style that Merton preferred and employed in his own classes represented a radical change of mentality; indeed, it required being formed to a new culture. It was not merely a question of using different texts and authors, but of cultivating a taste for another way of thinking.¹⁸

Dante responded to the Latin scholastic tradition by providing something like the same radical transformation, a poem—written in the vernacular, no less, rather than in the Latin that heretofore would have marked it out as a serious work—that dared to make the kind of metaphysical claims that were taken to be the province of theology and philosophy.¹⁹ Dante too was interested in forming a new culture, one that is easy to misunderstand and paradoxically, given Dante's canonical status, easy to underestimate. The point to be made is that from the perspective of the old guard, what Merton was proposing was new and radical and scary and therefore unorthodox. The parallel is that what Dante was proposing can also be looked at by one so inclined as new and radical and scary and therefore unorthodox. To the degree that he has become the wrong kind of icon, it is easy to forget that Dante is scary—at least if we are reading him right—but that scariness should not be construed as a lack of commitment to the central truths of his tradition.

What about that commencement address? The Notre Dame hierarchy figured that it would be better to take the grief, as they had done previously with Obama. They

reasoned that none of the “stop the heretic” campaigns had really gained enough momentum to offset the embarrassment of caving in to the pressure, and so they decided to let him talk, more out of pragmatism than principle, and let the chips fall where they may. Commencement addresses in any case tend toward the bland and banal. But at the last minute, just as Dante was striding to the podium to address the graduates, his robes flowing in a light breeze, something in the wiring system at the stadium went cuckoo, shorted out, and rocketed him back to the Empyrean, where he had been blissfully contemplating the Divine Presence after spending a couple of hundred well-earned years in the Terrace of the Proud in purgatory. A lot of people in high places were not unhappy with this turn of events. It made for an exciting story on the six o’clock news, but more to the point, the higher up the food chain, the greater the sense of relief, because the rumors had been slowly but steadily spreading that he had decided to bag the safe, conventional cheerleading/advice to the graduates/hortatory commencement address and present himself in the role that he had perfected during his previous sojourn on Earth: He had decided once again to play the prophet. And he had found, it was rumored, plenty of targets. The problem was that Dante had always been, as the *Commedia* gives ample testimony, a “name names” kind of guy, and the few short weeks that he had been around were more than enough time to put real targets in his gun sights or, to piggyback on one of Dante’s own images, for the arrow of his *ingegno*, his talent. Bishops were on edge because of the sex abuse scandal, politicians for their cozying up to big money. Indeed, we were all a little nervous, expecting him to indict us all for our massive failure of *ben comune*, the common good, in our political life and civic life, which is to say our systematic refusal to put the common good ahead of power, of party, and of self. All he would have to do was to rewrite a couple of passages from *Inferno* 10, putting in some contemporary names. But no, it turns out he had a different target. The notes that his advance man had placed on the podium were gathered up, and before they were whisked away to a vault somewhere in the bowels of the Hesburgh Library for safekeeping, rumor has it that some unauthorized person or persons caught a glimpse of them. It seems that his target was going to be the university itself. A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country. A prophet is also a lot easier to take when he is seven hundred years old and directing his righteous indignation elsewhere. This was hitting too close to home.

In some Catholic circles today, all it takes to get labeled a Cafeteria Catholic is to disagree with pronouncements that come from the pope or, even more generally, from the Vatican. Dante went a lot farther than that; a fierce opponent of the entire papal agenda in his day, he fought this agenda with righteous indignation and all the force his sublime poetry could muster. His accusations are far reaching: Popes are wolves in shepherds’ clothing, as he puts it in *Paradiso* (*Par.* 27.55), not only using their power for political purposes but using the spiritual resources at their disposal—excommunication, for example—for political purposes. Dante would be criticized if he were writing today for saying the very same things that he was saying seven centuries ago, even though he is considered an icon of orthodoxy from within

some of the same circles who were the targets of that very criticism: That is an interesting paradox. It is much easier to cut some slack to someone whose strong stands were on issues that have faded into history. But Dante remains, in the best sense, a dangerous and subversive writer, one who can be domesticated to fit an agenda only at the cost of greatly underinterpreting and underestimating him. We should not allow ourselves to do this.

NOTES

1. The controversy swirling around the pontificate of Pius XII, of course, focuses on the question of Nazi genocide against the Jews, and Pius's response (or lack of response) to it. The literature on both sides of the issue is now a medium-sized industry. The debate was inflamed by the 1963 play by Rolf Hochhuth, *The Deputy*, and centers on the question of whether Pius's silence was a consequence of prudence or of anti-Semitism. In *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 3rd ed., 2006), Eamon Duffy gives a nuanced account of the papacy of Pius XII, and his bibliographical notes contain a wealth of sources for further reading. See pp. 345–54, and for the bibliography, 451–52. As Duffy phrases it, “In this debate, objectivity and balance are in notoriously short supply” (451).
2. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander, introduction and notes by Robert Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 199.
3. So far as I know, no collection of Franciscan documents, including the standard edition of the early documents, includes Dante's life of Francis. Dante scholars see the importance of Francis for Dante, but Francis scholars have by and large not returned the favor of seeing the importance of Dante for Francis. See William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, “What Dante Learned from St. Francis,” in *Dante and the Franciscans*, ed. Santa Casciana (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 113–40.
4. For this aspect of Francis in Dante, see Ronald B. Herzman, “Dante and the Apocalypse,” in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 398–413.
5. For Bernard, see Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 2, *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 158–224.
6. For Bernard as poet, see McGinn, *The Presence of God*, 163.
7. For Bernard's reevaluation of his own earlier crusading zeal, see Jean Leclercq, “Introduction,” in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 52–57.
8. Leclercq, “Introduction,” 25.
9. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy 3: Paradiso*, trans. and ed. Robin Kirkpatrick (New York: Penguin, 2007), xxiii.
10. Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy 3*, xxxiv.
11. For the range of approaches on this topic, as well as a comprehensive bibliography, see Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew W. Traherne, eds., *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).
12. David Bentley Hart, *The Story of Christianity* (London: Quercus, n.d.), 209.
13. Hart, *The Story of Christianity*, 209.

14. The text of this encyclical can be found at www.papalencyclicals.net/Ben15/b15summo.htm.

15. Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 175. Earlier in his study, Moevs formulates the issue as follows: "'Revelation' (the 'unveiling of Christ') is by definition radical, and perhaps most radical to those most committed to promulgating it, because as Dante himself seems to have discovered, to promulgate it can be to defuse a world-shattering bomb into a set of ideas. . . . Its spiritual inefficacy could not be more evident than among Dante's greedy, quarrelsome, and murderous contemporaries, most of whom would have blithely professed allegiance to all the articles of Christian belief" (11).

16. Some of the issues connected to Dante's relation to the Church have been described by Maria Picchio Simonelli, "L'inquisizione e Dante: alcuni osservazioni," *Dante Studies* 97 (1979): 129–49. For Dante's relationship to Boniface VIII, the pope who sat on the chair of St. Peter in 1300, the fictional date of Dante's pilgrimage, see Ronald B. Herzman and William A. Stephany, "Dante and the Frescoes at Santi Quattro Coronati," *Speculum* 87, no. 1 (2012): 95–146.

17. John Eudes Bamberger, *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 2005).

18. Bamberger, *Thomas Merton*, 43.

19. For the extent of Dante's claims, see Moevs, whose examination of Dante's metaphysical presuppositions *passim* opens the reader to the great daring of the *Commedia*.