

Antonio Rosmini: His Life and Works

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Abstract

Rosmini's two works, *Delle Cinque Piaghe Della Santa Chiesa* and *La Costituzione La Guistizia Sociale* aroused great opposition especially among the Jesuits, and in 1849 these works were placed upon the Index. Rosmini's philosophical writings embroiled him in theological controversies throughout his lifetime. The controversy around his philosophical works required more than one Papal injunction. But, seeing through neutral and an objective prism, Rosmini's philosophy attempted to reconcile Catholic theology with modern political and social thought. In an audience with Pope Pius VII, Rosmini was encouraged by the latter to undertake the reform of philosophy. But Rosmini found himself wedged between the obligation to renew Catholic philosophy and finding his work on the Index. Before his death, Rosmini learned that the works in question were proclaimed free from censure by the Congregation of the Index.

INTRODUCTION

Antonio Rosmini was born in 1797 at Rovereto, an Italian village, which at that time formed part of the Eastern Hungarian Empire. The Rosmini family were well-off due to their involvement in the manufacture of silk. His father was Baron Pier Modesto Rosmini-Serbati, a member of a very old and wealthy noble family. His mother was Countess Giovanne dei Formenti from Riva, on lake Garda. They were cultured, generous and devout people, who zealously promoted the interests of the church. They had four children: Margherita (who became a nun), Antonio, Guiseppe and Felice, the youngest, who passed away at an early age.

Rosmini completed his tertiary training in Theology at the University of Padua and was ordained a priest in 1821. With his exceptional talent for writing, his colleagues encouraged him to write books on theology rather than to meet his duties as priest. His publications made a great impression in both spiritual and philosophical circles. He was so popular in church circles that Pius IX considered promoting him to cardinal.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Purpose of the Paper

The paper aims to clarify that although Rosmini's happy period of growth and his apostolic successes, he was tempered by opposition to his intellectual and philosophical writings until his death. In his writings and activities, Rosmini participates in a renewal of Italian philosophy, which will cause him troubles in the future. But Rosmini only wants through his works the reconciliation of Catholic theology with modern political and social thought. The centre of his philosophical system is the concept of ideal being, which is a reflection of God in humankind.

Design/Methodology of the Paper

The paper opted for a theoretical study. The data acquired are going to be complemented by documentary analysis. Antiquarian sources of history and Papal Encyclicals will be employed to render a holistic picture of the life and works of Antonio Rosmini. His opponents and

protagonists will also be placed against each other to fetter out whether Rosmini's philosophical system was just and right to the modern man in contemporary society.

Rosmini's Ideas of Church and State

The Piedmont Revolution made it impossible for Rosmini to be promoted to cardinal. At the request of Pius IX, Rosmini accompanied him to Gaeta, where the pope went to live in voluntary exile. Pius IX did not want church property to be under the supervision of the state and he rejected the nominations of priests by the state. In order to effect co-operation between church and state government, the Piedmont government requested Rosmini to initiate an agreement between this government and the pope. The Piedmont government wanted to establish a confederation of Italian towns, with the House of Savoy as the highest authority. This alliance would enjoy preference over the kingdom of Italian towns. When Rosmini failed to initiate such an alliance due both to the Piedmont government's refusal to accept the pope as honorary president and to this government's anti-church attitude, the Piedmont government promulgated legislation to suppress the church. With the independence of Italy from the Austrian domination and the subsequent rise of the Piedmont government, Rosmini feared the unilateral rejection of agreements which the Piedmont government concluded with the church.

The impact of the Austrian victory in Italy and Pius IX's liberal reforms gradually diminished Rosmini's influence.

Due to the Austrian-Hungarian suppression of the church officials in Italy, Rosmini founded two religious orders, the Instituto dei Fratelli della Carita and the Sisters of Divine Providence, to clinch his viewpoints on theology and philosophy.

Under the hegemony of the Austrian-Hungarian government bishops were degraded to state officials; seminars became colleges and priests had to write examinations set by the Austrian government. The censorship exercised by the Austrian government on the church was such:

"[...] [that] the number of candles that could be burned in church was limited, at one time even coffins were forbidden to the dead. Relics were no longer to be venerated, processions and pilgrimage needed special permission. Sermons, were controlled and censored to contain nihil de principe, parum de Dei (nothing about the prince, not much about God)."

DISCUSSION

Rosmini's Influence on his Followers

Rosmini was a controversial figure in Italy during his lifetime and even for years after his death. Despite his reputation in Italy, he was relatively unknown in Europe. On account of the extent of his work and the importance of his publications, Rosmini's works merit comprehensive investigation. His thoughts on theology, philosophy and fundamental rights deserve special attention. As far as his works on theology and philosophy are concerned, Rosmini (as neo-Thomist) concentrates in a typical Thomist fashion on the idea of being. This principle will be elucidated later in the book.

Rosmini seeks affinity with the Thomist notion of being, in particular as far as natural law is concerned. In Rosmini's human society or his perception on the state, the Thomist notion of being is the object of natural and fundamental rights. He has done important development work in this respect.

This chapter examines the various interpretations of Rosmini's points of view. The points of view of his supporters are discussed first, followed by a discussion of his critics. The aim is to determine whether Rosmini can be categorised under post-Thomism. It must first be established whether Rosmini was a Thomist or not.

W.J. (pseudonym) is of the opinion that the extent of Rosmini's work earned him a position among the great thinkers and a partnership in a small group of intellectuals in his reasonably short life. W.J. thus places Rosmini on par with Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Leibnitz, Kant and Hegel. He believes that Rosmini's points of view are of special significance and that he was an intellectual wonder. W.J. mentions the following about Rosmini:

"[...] because he is alive, and writes for readers taught by all their Lockian and Protestant education to treat the kind of thing that Rosmini represents [...] thoroughgoing, concatenated, and systematic ontologizing and theologizing by the conceptions of principle and term, substance and essence and act [...]"

Thomas Davidson valued Rosmini's work highly. He regards Rosmini as the most important philosopher of the nineteenth century and compares him to ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. According to Davidson, Rosmini's work deserves greater exposure and study as it makes a unique contribution to theology, philosophy and fundamental rights.

Davidson is of the opinion that Rosmini's work is also important beyond Thomist circles, not only for theology, philosophy and fundamental rights, but also for other scientific disciplines. According to Davidson, Rosmini's intellectual work presents clear parallels for cultural affinity for both Thomist and non-Thomist traditions of thought.

According to Rosmini, human reason must serve as the bridge between faith and reason. Davidson's remark supports the conclusion that faith and reason do not conflict with each other, but rather complement each other. Rosmini takes this further than Thomas Aquinas, with his opinion that human reason is subjective and subject to errors. The British Empiricists and the German Romantic School, which absolutised reason and ignored the light of faith, serve as examples. Rosmini states:

"[...] but because reason, when enlightened and fortified by divine authority, can contribute to greater understanding of what is revealed and be a support, not an obstacle, to religious faith [...]"

Davidson is of the opinion that Rosmini obviates the dangers of absolutisation of subjective human reason by focusing on the objective "light of the divine reason."

Beales is of the opinion that the distinction between "light of reason" and the use of human reason in Rosmini's *Nuovo Saggio sull'Origine delle Idee* (New Essay on the Origin of Ideas), encompasses an important development of Thomism. Rosmini and Thomism show similar approaches in respect of the idea of being as principle of all knowledge and criteria for certainty, as well as the inherent form of thought. The entire Thomism and Rosminian pedagogy is a result of this.

As far as commentators on the works of Rosmini are concerned, Beales is of the opinion that Leatham's biography of Rosmini surpasses all other studies of Rosmini in English. Like

Davidson, he believes that Rosmini's works are of special significance for a study of theology, philosophy and fundamental rights. Beales also point out that, because Rosmini often wrote contrary to the Thomist tradition, he became unpopular in church circles. Two of his best known works were later censored. One of these censored works, the *Delle Cinque Piaghe Della Santa Chiesa* ("The Five Wounds of the Holy Church"), which deals with the relationship between church and state, serves as an example of Rosmini's criticism against the Thomist church/state doctrines.

The latter work, *La Costituzione Civile Secondo La Giustizia Sociale* ("The Constitution on Social Justice") is of special interest for our current society and has presented solutions to theological and philosophical issues with which the church and state struggle currently.

Rosmini's works which are of great value for theological and philosophical truths, was consequently placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of Prohibited Books), by the request of the Jesuits who apparently maintained the classical Thomist doctrine of the Catholic Church.

Aubrey states the following concerning the Jesuits' hostility towards Rosmini:

"[...] his (Rosmini's) works were placed on the Index at the instigation of the Jesuits, then apparently released, and have been a subject of controversy ever since as to their ecclesiastical standing."

Rosmini's Jesuit critics used his deviation from church doctrine in an attempt to discredit his works. Because the Jesuits, as one of the oldest orders of the Catholic Church, according to Pesch, still considered the strict maintenance of traditional Thomism as the official doctrine of the church, they appealed to review Rosmini's works on theology, philosophy and law. The *modus operandi* of Rosmini's critics was the maintenance of classic or traditional Thomism. Their wish was to have Rosmini's works placed on the Index of Prohibited Books again, after they had been removed from the Index. When Pius IX did not heed the Jesuits' demands, Leo XIII, who succeeded the former, did yield to the Jesuits' demands.

Pesch writes:

"[...] but hardly had a new and more pliable Pope ascended the throne, when they applied to him for a remedy against Rosminianism, in the shape of a rehabilitation of Thomism, pure and simple, as the philosophy of the Church [...]"

Leo now made a desperate attempt to revise Rosmini's works in order to appeal to traditional Thomism, as is evident from the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* in 1879.

Boelaars mentions Pius' (and consequently Leo's) love for traditional Thomism as follows:

"Paus Leo XIII verborg van de begin af zijn voorliefde voor de wijsbegeerte van den H. Thomas niet. Reeds enkele malen had hij er blijk van gegeven, toen den 4 Augustus 1879, als derde zijner encyclicken, de wereldbrief Aeterni Patris verscheen: De philosophia christiana ad mentem sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris angelici in scholis catholicis instauranda; over het herstel van de christelijke wijsbegeerte naar den geest van den engelachtigen leeraar, den H. Thomas van Aquino, in de katolieke intichtingen van onderwijs."

According to this, the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* shows a new turn in the Rosminian conflict. Boelaars alleges that in an encyclical *Dum Vitiatae*, dated June 1880, Leo XIII recommends that the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas according to the interpretation by Cajetan, Ferraricus, Liberatore, Sanseverino, Zigliara be followed and that Rosmini's teachings be avoided. Leo XIII's revision of Rosmini's works ended with the censure of fourteen statements from Rosmini's posthumous works. On 6 June 1849 Leo XIII confirmed the decree Sacred Congregation of the Index. The censures by the Sacred Congregation of the Index are usually given in one of the following formulas, namely *prohibeatur, prohibeatur donec corrigatur aut expurgetur* and *dimittantur*.

However, Rosmini's works were exempted from censure by means of Pius IX's *Dimittantur* of 1854, and could not be censured again. The *dimittantur* exempts Rosmini's works of heresy, but explains that this is dangerous or disadvantageous for the interests of the church: "[...] merely by their liability to misinterpretation in consequence of peculiar expressions and the particular temper of the times." On account of the exoneration of Rosmini's works by Pius IX's *dimittantur*, Leo XIII could not only state in his decree *Post Obitum* of 1887 that forty proposals of Rosmini's prohibited works from the *Delle Cinque Piaghe Della Santa Chiesa* and the *Costituzione Secondo La Giustizia Sociale* are not in accordance with Catholic truths "*catholicae veritati haud consonae videbantur*."

There were several reactions against the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. The most impressive argument against the *Aeterni Patris* was that the pope wanted to take civilisation back to the Middle Ages. Boelaars argues that Leo XIII's encyclical *Pergratus nobis*, dated 7 March 1880, reflects this line of thought. Accordingly, it was speculated that Leo XIII's predilection for the traditional Thomism caused one to deduce that he did not wish to raise a non-Christian Aristotle above Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Despite this allegation against Leo XIII, he (Leo) explicitly campaigned for a Thomist philosophical education.

On account of Leo XIII's heated effort for a Thomist tradition in the church (at the request of the Jesuits), Rosmini's forty views did not stand a chance of being accepted by mainstream Catholic thinkers. Rosmini's doctrines were neither capable of penetrating the world. Now that attitudes have changed as a result of the dedicated works of a few men who believed in Rosmini's "system of truth" at the time of his defamation or persecution, it is hoped that through this research Rosmini's works will enjoy the general attention it deserves.

Sheldon avers that Giuseppe Morando assumes that Leo XIII was moved by the pressure exerted on him by the Jesuits to censure Rosmini's works, which he would otherwise not have done. Sheldon also believes that Rosmini's proposals are in harmony with sound theological and philosophical doctrines and in accordance with Catholic standards.

Morando, a follower of Rosmini, extolls Sheldon for supporting or defending Rosmini's philosophical, theological and legal points of view. He is convinced that the rejection of Rosmini's works on theology, philosophy and law are unwarranted. Morando expresses his indignance against the hostile references in manuals in which Rosmini's works are discredited. According to Sheldon, Morando is of the view that Rosmini did not at all disregard the doctrines of the Catholic Church. Sheldon refers to a quotation by Morando in which pope Gregorius XVI shows great respect for Rosmini: "*virum excellenti ac praestanti ingenio praeditum, egregiisque animi dotibus ornatum, rerum divinarum atque humanarum scientia summopere*

illustrutrem.” (Rosmini was an excellent person blessed with an extraordinary intellect. He is imbued and equipped with an extraordinary talent to patiently relate divine issues with human science).

Sheldon maintains that the rejection of Rosmini’s doctrines under Popes Pius and Leo XIII were the result of undue influence on the basis of political considerations by the Jesuits. Some writers even believe that Rosmini’s doctrines can be associated with the points of view of Galileo. Sheldon says:

“[...] over an against an Inquisition, which has committed the two greatest possible errors in the field of physical science and in that of metaphysics, in condemning Galileo and Rosmini, the rebels of today are the truest Catholics of tomorrow.”

Guiseppe mentions that Rosmini’s points of views were not at all contrary to those of the Catholic Church: “[...] each of the forty condemned propositions can be justified as being in harmony with sound philosophical and theological doctrines and agreeable to Catholic standards.” Guiseppe is also of the opinion that Rosmini was therefore not guilty of any serious deviation from church dogma.

Blau considers Rosmini to be possibly the greatest thinker of all time: “[...] (Rosmini) whom I hold to be the greatest thinker of modern time, perhaps the greatest of all times.” Blau alleges that a full study of Rosmini requires a knowledge of the points of view of Davidson who contributed to the development of Rosmini’s philosophy.

Norman St. John-Stevas alleges that Rosmini’s theological and philosophical points of view will one day replace Thomism as the official philosophy of the Catholic Church.

CONCLUSION

Rosmini wants to reconcile Catholic theology with modern political and social thought. The traditional Thomist philosophers and the Jesuits got stuck in their Medieval way of thought and could not find a way to cut the umbilical cord with its doctrinal document, the Aeterni Patris, which is the official philosophy of the Catholic Church. The Jesuits’ thought had rendered them stagnant for a very long period, and when an enlightened thinker like Rosmini emerged to the philosophical and theological arena they felt threatened and as a result discredit the latter’s works. They would have feared a prophetic announcement made in this paper, that Rosmini’s philosophy would have one day replace Thomism and became the new official philosophy of the Catholic Church. As Pope John Paul II stated in his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, that Rosmini is one of the greatest Christian thinkers ever.

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