THE COINCIDENCE OF OPPOSITES: A RECENT INTERPRETATION OF BONAVENTURE

A thesis on the theology of St. Bonaventure has recently been put forward which, should it be accepted by the generality of Bonaventurian scholars, would break entirely new ground. In a well-written and consistently interesting book, *Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1978), Ewert H. Cousins has proposed that the key to the theology of the Seraphic Doctor is the notion of the coincidence of opposites: "I believe that Bonaventure belongs squarely within this tradition [of the coincidence of opposites] and that his thought can be best interpreted in the light of the coincidence of opposites."[1]

I

The thesis is carefully qualified. First, it is readily admitted that Bonaventure never uses the expression "coincidence of opposites." But this makes the thesis all the more striking: the coincidence of opposites would have been the unthematic pattern of Bonaventure's theological thought. Second, Cousins thinks that Bonaventure did make progress in his use of the notion. Of relatively little importance, except for the doctrine of the Trinity, in the first period of Bonaventure's career, marked by the *Commentary on the Sentences* (1250–56), coincidence of opposites was systematically applied to Christology during the second period, marked by the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1259); and during the last period, marked by the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron* (1273), it became a universal key to the Christocentric understanding of the universe then expounded by the great Franciscan.

Third, Cousins also limits the scope of his thesis by explaining what he means by coincidence of opposites. Three meanings are distinguished: (1) a monistic view, which sees opposites as truly identical, as in the Hindu philosopher Shankara; (2) a dualistic view, where coincidence is never complete, for the opposites, persisting as opposites, are simply united "by external juxtaposition,"[2] as, according to Cousins, in the biblical and Islamic doctrines of the transcendence of God; (3) a third system, in which "opposites genuinely coincide while at the same time continuing to exist as opposites.... The more intimately the opposites are united, the more they are differentiated. I call this a coincidence of mutually affirming complementarity".[3] This would be found in Taoism, Martin Buber, Teilhard, and Bonaventure.

[1] Cousins, *Bonaventure* 15–16. See the review by Frank Podgorski in *TS* 40 (1979) 790.
[2] Cousins 19.
[3] Cousins 20.

At this point one may wonder if this analysis is sufficient. Two recent approaches to the problem of opposites have been left out.

In the first place, there is the distinction, which is basic to contemporary structuralism,[4] between simple opposites and contradictory opposites. Some opposites, implying reciprocal negation, are antithetic, irreconcilable; they cannot coincide in any sense. Others are simply different. Mutually affirming complementarity falls within the category of the different, not in that of the contradictory. Translated as the identity of contradictories, *coincidentia oppositorum* would deny the principle of identity, which Cousins maintains.[5] Translated as a coincidence of simple opposites, it draws attention to the fact that some differences are indeed not contradictory, are compatible with positive relationships, may be mutually enriching. But in this case one may wonder if the expression "coincidence of opposites" is more than a metaphor and can really be made the key to an ontology.

In the second place, while Hegel and Marx are mentioned by Cousins, one misses a consideration of Mao Zedong's interpretation of the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic. Mao distinguished between antagonistic contradictions, which should be eliminated if progress is to be made, since they are not reconcilable, and nonantagonistic contradictions, which can be tolerated. He further distinguished, in each contradiction, between its principal aspect and its secondary aspects. Only the principal aspect needs to be attended to, secondary aspects being expected to follow the fate, for ill or for good, of the principal aspect. Mutually affirming complementarity would belong to the category of nonantagonistic contradiction. But has Cousins' analysis of such contradictions in the theology of Bonaventure been made in relation to their principal aspect? Has it not given primary attention to rhetorical devices? We are back at the question of Bonaventure's systematic use of metaphors.[6] But if indeed the secondary or peripheral has, in Cousins' analysis, dominated the primary or central, the proposed hypothesis is based on a confusion between the several modes of discourse of Bonaventure.

In the course of his demonstration, Cousins appeals to Carl Jung's explorations of symbolism and his theory of archetypes. The mandala has especially retained Cousins' attention. The coincidence of opposites

[4] This refers to the European structuralism of de Saussure, Hjelmslev, and Greimas, not to the American structuralism of Chomsky.

[5] Cousins 20–21.

[6] See my article "St. Bonaventure as Mystic and Theologian," in Margaret Schatkin, ed., *The Heritage of the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Georges Florovsky* (Rome, 1973) 289–306, at 290. For the philosophy of Mao Zedong, see the two essays "On Contradiction" and "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People" in *Four Philosophical Essays* (Peking, 1966) 23–78 and 79–133.

of mutually affirming complementarity would, in Bonaventure, take the form of a mandala. Thus there would be remarkable similarities between the thought of Bonaventure and the findings of comparative religion. Bonaventure's method would illustrate a phenomenon of all religious thought. In the light of this further hypothesis, Cousins looks for convergences between Bonaventurianism and some contemporary movements, such as process theology and philosophy. This evidently brings up a basic difficulty. Appeal to Jungian archetypes to explain the theology of Bonaventure can only satisfy those who are already convinced by Jung's hypothesis. Those who, like myself, remain sceptical will not be impressed. Admittedly, to view the mandala as a basic Christian symbol effectively balances the opinion of Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, that, with one exception, Christ was not seen as standing at the center of a circle before Erasmus.[7] Yet it is a notable departure from objective critical method to see Bonaventure's use of Aristotle's four causes as a basic mandala sketch, while St. Thomas' recourse to the same fourfold causality is taken to show that Thomas thinks only according to a binary structure with a twofold pattern.[8] One may also question the wisdom of applying a category of the Renaissance, the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Nicholas of Cusa, to a Scholastic of the thirteenth century, and of relying on a psychological theory of the twentieth century which is itself rejected by a sizable portion of the psychoanalyst community for which it was created.

In the present paper, however, I will refrain from further examining these more hazardous speculations. I will rather focus on the central problem: Is the coincidence of opposites, in the sense given to it by Cousins, the proper key to Bonaventure's theology? Since Cousins finds the coincidence of opposites in Bonaventure's Christology, Christology will retain our attention.

II

As they approach the question of the Incarnation, the Scholastics commonly ask if incarnation, or union to a human nature, is possible on the part of the divine nature. This question is examined successively from the viewpoint of the divine nature and from that of the human nature. In regard to the divine nature, it is asked if such a union is possible from the standpoint of the nature as such and from that of the divine Persons. Through this problematic, the Schoolmen's thought converges on the

[7] Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology* (Toronto, 1977) 110. The one exception in question is in the apocryphal *Acts of John*.

[8] Cousins 212.

Chalcedonian doctrine: the union of the divine and the human natures in Christ is immediately a union of the human nature to the divine Person of the Word. Through the Person the natures are united; they are not united directly.

The discussion approaches the problem of a coincidence of opposites as the Scholastic questioner remarks that the divine and the human natures are infinitely distant in being from each other. This distance is beyond any sort of distanciation that may be experienced in this world. It is *infinita distantia*.[9] This point derives from the Bonaventurian affirmation, which is both simple and far-reaching, that the divine nature is *extra genus*: "Deus autem et creatura nullum genus commune participant"[10] (God and the creature do not share a common genus). On this basis Bonaventure formulates in his own way the principle of the Fourth Lateran Council: "Similitudo est inter creaturam et Creatorem, ita tamen quod major reperitur dissimilitudo"[11] (The similarity between creature and Creator is such that there is a greater dissimilarity). But if God and the human nature do not fall within a common genus—and this remains the constant doctrine of Bonaventure—then they obviously cannot fall within the genus which is necessarily common to opposites. For opposites, as Bonaventure clearly states, fall within one genus: "Omnia opposita communicant in aliquo genere proximo vel remoto"[12] (All opposites communicate in genus, whether proximately or remotely). This principle, used as an objection to the possibility of the Incarnation, is fully endorsed by Bonaventure. What the Seraphic Doctor rejects is the conclusion: "facilius est unire aliqua opposita quam sit unire divinam naturam cum humana" (It is easier to unite some opposites than to unite the divine nature with the human). For, as Bonaventure points out in his response, participation in the common genus of two opposites is not sufficient to make their union possible. There must also be a natural ordination of the one to the other for opposites to be united: "... nisi sit aliqua convenientia secundum rationem inclinationis et ordinis, sicut patet"[13] (unless there is some congruence of inclination and order [between them], as is self-evident). When, therefore, Bonaventure rejects the argument that God and human nature cannot be united because opposites cannot be united, he makes two points: (1) the human and the divine natures are not opposites; (2) they can be united, not as opposites but insofar as a creature is related to God as its beginning and end ("sicut ad causam et complementum"). The first point is essential to Bonaventure's doctrine

[9] Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Sentences* 3, d. 2, a. 1, q. 1, ad 2.

[10] Ibid d. 1, a. 1, q. 1, 5. This is part of an objection, but the idea is accepted in the response.

[11] Ibid. d. 1, a. 3, q. 3, ad 1. On the formula of Lateran IV, see DS 806.

[12] Ibid. d. 1, a. 1, q. 1, 5.

[13] Ibid. d. 1, a. 1, q. 1, ad 5.

of God: the Creator is not the opposite of His creatures; the infinite is not the opposite of the finite.

Admittedly, Bonaventure is thinking here of contradictory opposites. This is the point of the objection: God cannot make that a man be a donkey or that white be black. Bonaventure is, therefore, not referring to a coincidence of mutually affirming complementarity. In relation to the same problem, Thomas Aquinas appeals to the principle of identity: "Contraria nunquam possunt uniri hoc modo quod insint eidem secundum idem; et sic etiam nec creatura Creatori unitur"[14] (Contraries can never be united in such a way that they are at the same point in the same way; and the creature is not united to the Creator in that way). But this does not blunt the point I am making; for the principle of the excluded genus (God is not within any genus) extends to all opposites. God does not fall within the genus of mutually affirming opposites.

Thus the Scholastics, and Bonaventure in particular, although they do not use the expression *coincidentia oppositorum*, are nevertheless acquainted with the concept. Bonaventure speaks of "convenientia oppositorum"[15] and uses such verbs as *uniri, conjungere, permisceri.* He explicitly rules out any union of opposites involving God as one of the terms united. The basic reason for this is the analogical doctrine of God. Just as God does not fall within any genus, God is not the opposite of any creature; God cannot be connumerated with anything. This is stated explicitly. Oneness, in God, is not compatible with any kind of potentiality. Therefore it must exclude all mutually affirming complementarity:

Cum in Deo sit perfectissima unitas, ibi accipitur secundum omnimodam privationem multitudinis. Hoc autem modo dicitur unum, quod non habet in se actu multitudinem, nec est in potentia ad multitudinem, neque per divisionem neque per aggregationem. Hoc autem unum est perfectissimum et summum et infinitum, et illud non est in potentia ad numerum, et hoc non est alii connumerabile; et hoc

[14] Thomas, *Commentary on the Sentences* 3, d. 1, a. 1, q. 1, ad 4.

[15] Bonaventure, *CSent* 3, d. 1, a. 1, q. 1, ad 5. Rejection of the coincidence of opposites as a suitable model in theology is equally clear in the Disputed Questions *De mysterio Trinitatis* (1253–55). Bonaventure speaks of *unio summe distantium* and declares it to be repugnant to the intellect: "... unio summe distantium est omnino repugnans nostro intellectui, quia nullus intellectus potest cogitare aliquid unum simul esse et non esse ..." (... the union of extremely distant realities is totally repugnant to our intellect, for no intellect can think one thing as both being and not being ... [*De myst. Trin.* q. 1, a. 1, resp.]). In ad 5, Bonaventure agrees that "contradictoria non infert suam contradictoriam" (an assertion does not imply the contradictory assertion). In q. 1, a. 2, ad 2, he admits that "omne illud cujus contrarium omnis natura creata praetendit est incredibile" (a thing is incredible if the whole created nature shows its contrary). In other words, contradictories cannot be equally true. The contradiction of the universal testimony of nature is not believable. Thus Bonaventure systematically rejects logical models based on the coincidence of opposites (in the strict sense).

modo est in solo Deo[16] (Since the most perfect unity is in God, it is taken here with total exclusion of plurality. "One" is said in such a way that it neither has in itself actual plurality nor is potentially plural, whether by division or by addition. This oneness is the most perfect, supreme, infinite. It is not potentially numerable and cannot be connumerated with another. This mode of unity is only in God).

This basic principle pervades Bonaventure's theology of the Incarnation. That it effectively excludes the union of opposites as a suitable model for the Incarnation is confirmed by his analysis of union. In distinction 6, a. 2, q. 1 and 2, Bonaventure examines the different kinds of union that are possible, in order to determine which is applicable to the Incarnation. Question 1 finds that there are four types, from the standpoint of the relationships between the two objects that are united: conversion of the one into the other; alteration of each so that a third object results from their union; constitution of a third object with no alteration of its constituents; insertion of one object into the other with no alteration or constitution of a third. Question 2 surveys the theories of union proposed by the philosophers Al Gazali (1059–1111) and Aristotle and by St. Bernard. There are eight kinds of union for Al Gazali, twelve kinds according to Aristotle: none of them applies to the union of the two natures in Christ. "Ergo videtur quod modus illius unionis excedat omnes unionis modos"[17] (Therefore one concludes that this union transcends all modes of union). There are nine kinds of unity according to St. Bernard, the last one, "unitas dignativa," being special to the Incarnation. Bonaventure pushes the analysis further in light of the principle of analogy: "nulla creatura perfecte Deo assimilatur, sed quodam modo est similis, quodam modo dissimilis"[18] (No creature is perfectly similar to God, but it is partly similar, partly dissimilar). The union of the two natures in Christ is partly similar to some of the other types of unity in St. Bernard's list. Yet in regard to the sum total of its characteristics, it transcends all natural types of unity and even all other unity achieved by grace: "Quantum ad omnes conditiones simul collectas, nullum modum habet unitatis sibi consimilem, quia superexcedit omnem naturam et omnem aliam gratiam communem."[19]

For Bonaventure, the union of the two natures in the Word Incarnate does not follow any created model, whether of nature or of grace. It follows so little the model of a coincidence of opposites that this is not even listed among the types of union that are worth considering. And this is not because Bonaventure would have no acquaintance with the concept. Question 3 ad 4 explicitly rules out "illa unitas et multiplicatio

[16] *Commentary on the Sentences* 1, d. 24, a. 1, q. 1, ad 3.
[17] Ibid. 3, d. 6, a. 1, q. 2, a.
[18] Ibid. corpus.
[19] Ibid. corpus.

quae habent aliquam oppositionem" (the unity and multiplicity which are somehow opposite). When such unity and multiplicity become one, "minuitur oppositum cum suo opposito permiscetur" (Each opposite diminishes when it is mixed with the other). But this, precisely, is not the case in the Incarnation: the terms now united were not in opposition. "Multiplicitas in natura non repugnat unitati in persona"[20] (Multiplicity of natures is not opposed to unity in one person). Bonaventure has thus explicitly rejected coincidence of opposites as a model for the Incarnation. "Unitas illa, quae est in Christo, unitas est super omnes unitates suprema" (The unity which is in Christ is the supreme unity above all unities). It has no model. "Ideo simpliciter concedendum est unitatem quae est in Christo omnem unitatem creatam superexcedere" (Therefore one must simply conclude that the unity which is in Christ exceeds immeasurably all created unity).[21]

It is, therefore, a misreading of Bonaventure's theology of the Incarnation to present Christ as the center of a coincidence of opposites, models of which would pervade the entire universe and all religions.

III

One should, of course, recognize that Prof. Cousins has not tried to base his thesis on the *Commentary on the Sentences*. He has given numerous examples, from the other works of Bonaventure, of what he takes to be instances of a coincidence of opposites of mutually affirming complementarity. But it would be a hazardous method to interpret the later works of the Seraphic Doctor against the explicit testimony of the *Commentary*. The suggestion that Bonaventure's thought developed in matters of Christology is acceptable if it does not involve contradicting the *Commentary*. But this is precisely the case in regard to coincidence of opposites. The thesis that has been proposed is in contradiction to the theology of the *Commentary*. Therefore one should look for other explanations and models for the many cases, duly noticed by Cousins, in which Christ is presented by Bonaventure as being at the center, as constituting the *medium* of other realities: *medium metaphysicum, physicum, mathematicum, logicum, ethicum, politicum, theologicum*.[22]

The principle of such an emphasis presumably derives from the doctrine of St. Augustine, that Christ teaches physics, ethics, topics, politics.[23] The special form taken by this Augustinian notion in the writings of Bonaventure and especially in the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron* depends on Bonaventure's understanding of the analogy of faith founded on divine

[20] Ibid. d. 6, a. 1, q. 3, ad 4.

[21] Ibid. q. 3, corpus.

[22] Cousins 174.

[23] Augustine, *Letter 137 to Volusianus* (PL 33, 522–24). See my article "The Christological Tradition of the Latin Fathers," *Dialog* 18 (1979) 265–70.

exemplarity.[24] It has nothing to do with a philosophical notion of the coincidence of opposites, whether thematically asserted or unthematically assumed.[25]

IV

The *coincidentia oppositorum*, discarded by Bonaventure, was introduced into Christian theology by Nicholas of Cusa. What did Nicholas understand by it? Simply that Christian philosophy is not a matter of human reason but of divine intellect. "In acknowledging the *coincidentia oppositorum* lies the beginning of the ascent into mystical theology."[26] It expresses Nicholas' metaphysical theory that God is not only the being of all that is but also the nonbeing of all that is not. God is beyond the principle of noncontradiction: contradictories are unified in the total oneness of the divine Being. *Docta ignorantia* is the noetic counterpart of this metaphysical notion. Whatever may be said for or against Nicholas of Cusa's theories, they express neither the metaphysics nor the epistemology of the Seraphic Doctor. Bonaventure is, in fact, closer to the perspective of St. John of the Cross, for whom the Christian ascent to God manifests the truth of the philosophical axiom "Two contraries cannot coexist in the same subject." Here the Mystical Doctor takes opposites in a broad sense: "What has," he asks, "the creature to do with the Creator, the sensory with the spiritual, the visible with the invisible, the temporal with the eternal...?" He concludes to the necessity of fighting self-attachment if we desire "the nakedness of Christ."[27] He rules

[24] See my *Transiency and Permanence: The Nature of Theology according to St. Bonaventure* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y., 1954) 221–24. A thorough study of Bonaventure on the point under review would show that the centrality of Christ in the cosmos is not a late doctrine of Bonaventure (Cousins 63). It is already stated in Sermon 4 of the Sunday Sermons, dated between 1250–56, i.e., during his teaching at the University of Paris—the period of his *Commentary on the Sentences*. See Jacques Bougerol, ed., *Sermones dominicales* (Grottaferrata, 1977) text, pp. 156–62; note, pp. 15–16.

[25] Is it so clear that Christ's being at the center of all should evoke the image of the mandala, whose center unites in itself the opposites located at the circumference? A different image is suggested in Bonaventure's remark that "in puncto ... lineae uniuntur tanquam in termino" (*CSent* 3, d. 5, a. 1, q. 1, ad 4). A point unites the many lines that touch it. Likewise, Christ is at the center because in him "temporalia mysteria impleantur" (*Breviloquium* 4, c. 3, n. 5). In Christ all the mysteries of time are fulfilled, like so many lines converging upon him. An excellent study of Christ as the center will be found in Klaus Hemmerle, *Theologie als Nachfolge: Bonaventura—ein Weg für heute* (Freiburg, 1975).

[26] Quoted by Edmond Vansteenberghe, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues (1401–1464): L'Action—la pensée* (Paris, 1920) 283.

[27] *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 1, c. 6, n. 1; see also 1, c. 4, n. 2 (Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, eds., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* [Washington, D.C., 1973] 85, 78).

out by implication the idea that such "contraries" stand in a relationship of mutually affirming complementarity.

Methodist Theological School, Ohio GEORGE H. TAVARD