

## An Example of Social Thomism: Thomas Gilby (1902–1975)<sup>[1]</sup>

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The life of Norman Gilby, born in Birmingham, changed direction when his family became Catholics on the eve of the First World War. He entered the English Dominican Province within a year of the war's end. Ordained priest in 1926, the great hopes reposed in him were shown when he was sent to Louvain to study for the doctorate (academic doctors were *rarae aves* in the Province of the period). From 1931 to 1936, he taught moral theology at Blackfriars Oxford and helped in the editing of the journal *Blackfriars* at a difficult period in its history: difficult, that is, owing to conflicting sympathies in Order, Church and nation in England with the belligerent parties in the Spanish Civil War. In 1936 he left Oxford for London, giving university of London 'extension lectures' and playing a part in the Chelsea-centred Catholic intelligentsia of the time whose best-known names were the novelists Greene and Waugh. (Gilby would turn his hand to novel-writing and to that favoured genre of the 1930s, detective fiction.) The rest of his life would be bound up with Blackfriars Cambridge, although a significant interlude is formed by the Second World War, when he served with sufficient distinction to be offered the post of Principal naval chaplain. He declined. His great work in the 'house of writers' of the Province was the editing in 60 volumes of a new bilingual edition of the *Summa Theologiae*, with substantial introductions, appendices and notes. Gilby not only edited the series generally, but himself prepared translations and apparatus for 13 of the volumes. He died suddenly, shortly after sending the last texts to the printer, on 29 November 1975.

In the inter-war period of more strictly (and professionally) neo-Thomist writing in the Province, Thomas Gilby's contribution is chiefly to be found in two works: *Between Community and Society* and *Principality and Polity*.

It may surprise the present-day reader that in the pair of terms – 'community' and 'society' – crucial to Gilby's first political study, 'community' has primitivist, and, to a degree, negative connotations whereas those of 'society' are chiefly eschatological, and overwhelmingly

positive. For Gilby, 'political science is the study of civilized styles of living together, which do not emerge until after the stage, studied by *scientia oeconomica*, when the human mass is still a cluster of family and tribal groups'. 'Community' is the group-life investigated by ethnology, social anthropology, and psychology, cultural history and comparative religion. Vital though it may be as the material matrix of civilisation, it remains too immured within the biological, and hence the forced, to be a suitable sobriquet for the humane city. At the other end of the spectrum of the human ascent, through ever deepening and widening forms of consciousness and freedom, there lies 'society' – the spiritual association of those destined, by nature and grace, to be to each other eternal companions. Such spiritual friendship is realized through the *magnum sacramentum* of Christ and the Church, and lies beyond the political, in the realm of theology proper.

And yet the metaphor of the 'spectrum' misleads, for in Gilby's presentation, pure community and pure society are themselves abstractions. Human beings 'can never be so consolidated' (in the communitarian mass) that they 'cannot be dispersed', nor are they ever so 'subtilised' (by spiritual society) that 'material processes cannot move them': *The pure community, or city of Force, and the pure society, or city of Freedom, are not, therefore, separable as complete human situations; a man is not to be mistaken, from excess of science, for a specimen of a pure community member, nor, from a deficiency of science, for a person unique and away on his own. the human community ascends to the conditions of the human society through political institutions: the life of the spiritual society flows back into the depths of the material community.*

In the state, neither the appetites issuing from community nor the aspirations towards spiritual society receive a free rein; rather, they are yoked together by discipline, both legal and political. Both, then, are present, and active – 'just as unconscious knowledge and ecstasy are latent in rational discourse, even in mathematics'. It behoves the state not to separate them too drastically, on

pain of the common people ceasing to be at home in the civil order, on the one side, and the elite feeling no cause for pride on the other. It is, in Gilby's view, a strength of Aquinas' approach to the philosophy of the *polis* that it would hold both ends of the chain: for the material cause of the state is the instinctual group, joined by local loyalties, while its final cause lies in promoting the life of friendship, and hence in a communion that adumbrates the City of God.

Liberal humanism between, say, the 1840s and the 1920s, was so (temporarily) successful that it scarcely needed to speculate about the prior conditions and further implications of political flourishing; but now this sort of fuller analysis is needed, and the main reason for the new urgency – apart from considerations of the defective ideologies abroad – would seem to be a collapse of social cohesion: *The grace of original righteousness, with which human nature was created, was bestowed to brace compounds of mind and matter that tended to disintegrate, not from the weakness and poverty, but from the strength and richness of their parts. If organisms contain cells that strain to go pirating away on their own, then clusters formed by human beings living in communities will be no more compact, for they are larger and looser, and their elements are dogged centres of self-interest.*

Gilby hoped that the application of 'social conceptions formed from widely differing traditions in the thirteenth century by a philosophy distrustful of clumsy alternatives' would, in mediating between 'functional duties and personal rights', hit the mark. *Principality and Polity* treats St Thomas' political thought as the classical statement of the developed form of his own sources; and in so doing explains the genesis of Gilby's own ideas in *Between Community and Society*, for these are a representation of what he considered Aquinas' most genial intuitions.

For Gilby, the good state is not so much the just state as the civilised state; or rather, the concept of justice must be entertained in so wide-ranging a sense (that which is, in a variety of ways, 'due') that it comes to coincide with the notion of civilisation itself. Like the well-tempered family, the healthy state will combine respect for distinct personalities with the 'warmth of merging and belonging', thus producing 'a mingling of freedom

and dependence, of adventure and security, of private enterprise and common guarantees'.

A number of factors come together in the happy political community. First, since the best law is custom enforced (rather than governmental edict), tradition is of vital importance, not least in advanced societies: *Well-established authority will hesitate to displace ancient and immemorial customs by new-fangled regulations, or to substitute for old ways a brand-new constitution, tested by frequent plebiscite, after the fashion of nineteenth-century liberal revolutionaries. For one reason, nature as manifested in custom is freer, more flexible, and adaptive to circumstances than are such rigid artifices of law; for another, in politics, as in music, painting, and architecture, style possesses little lasting vitality when it offers pure form. neither civic good sense nor social justice alone can produce loyal and devoted attachment.*

Second, the fortunate state is one in which individuals are readily disposed to enter into *amicitia utilis* – agreements with strangers to the family group by which, despite the lack of kinship bond, they consider themselves bound. The historian of medieval society Paul Vinogradoff regarded the history of contract as the greatest contribution of town life to the development of law. Just so, the typical political man of St Thomas' writings is the *civis*, for that fuller community of the *bourg*, with its fairs and markets, and later the mercantile cities, has, through voluntary association, special opportunities for practising civility. Aquinas did not regard the state as an artificial concern, originating in such contract, as though it were a firm for trading, and yet he considered that a shared *jus* implies the distinction and independence of persons – and to that extent a multiplicity of free associations, generating a certain pluralism within its unity.

Third, then, a well-organised state will manifest partnership and cooperation, an over-organised one the abrogation of individual responsibility. For the state is 'the entire human commonwealth' – not just the legal organ of government, much less (in the modern context) the 'party which has captured it': *The political man, the typical citizen, in whom should meet influences from below through the archaic symbols of his race, and influences from above through the commands of a heavenly society, may become fixed*

*in isolation between the two, rootless and hopeless, neither an animal nor a spirit, but a complex of conventions, a creature of the State, a man without country on earth or in heaven, a displaced person, his rights precarious, never loved just as he stands, but docketed under a number and expended on some scheme.*

Cooperation entailed agreed reasonableness in social life; the *sanior pars* was more weighty than the mere numerical majority. Gilby found the colleges of the studium, that new ‘third estate’ of thirteenth-century Christendom, to be its exemplars.

Fourth, the flourishing state requires some form of clerisy, and, linked with this, the intelligent apprehension of an objective order of things. A ‘body of clerks’ must attempt to set out fundamental laws, as revealed by God or discovered by reason, in a consistent system of obligations and duties: its significance will lie, in good measure, in the setting of bounds to what government may do. The difference between tyrant and king turns on the question of respect for law: *Positive and purely political law has its proper independence, yet without operating in an enclave: all the sciences should mingle together, and so should the arts; in law, the eternal runs into the provisional, and positive law applies the lasting natural law in works of the statesman’s art. Obviously to such a theory law is a more comprehensive concept than it is to modern specialist legalism, to which law is the command of the human sovereign and an ‘unjust law’ a contradiction in terms.*

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt of the Chapter: *The English Dominican Social Tradition*, in F. Compagnoni – H. Alford (eds.), *Preaching Justice, Contributions to Social Ethics in the Twentieth Century*, Dominican Publications, Dublin 2007.

To the state, confidence is more necessary than obedience; and rulers will be trusted if they respect standards not of their devising. Wippo’s proverb, *legem servare, hoc est regnare*, expressed the authentically constitutional spirit of early medieval government, despite the lack of formal constitutions, measuring all the acts of the legislative and executive powers. Certainly St Thomas, in his *de regimine principum*, was far from admiring paternal absolutism. Gilby, if asked to choose between country and court party, would opt for the Whig: *Altogether there are good grounds for calling St Thomas the first Whig, if a Whig is a man who believes that social and political life should be run according to a reasonable constitution, and who reserves to himself the right of deciding to break it in cases where the ordinary rules do not apply.*

The influence of Aquinas’ notion of *epikeia*, prominent in Thomist moral theology (not least as Gilby presented it), makes here its surprising entrée into English Dominican social thought. But the use of the term ‘reasonable’ in Gilby’s praise of the Whig constitution is question-begging. The nature of the basic context in which difficult questions of social decisionmaking should be adjudicated, and the character of the rationality that befits their resolution, was the fundamental issue at stake in the divided counsels, which the last section of this essay describes.