

A Discourse on the Romance Between Philosophy and Christian Theology

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Abstract

This piece points out that although the histories of Philosophy and theology reveal an ‘ecstatic’ romance, successfully penetrating to the very basis of their real existence, they differ in their principles and objectives. While theology is based on the grace of revealed faith and regards the revealed mysteries of God, philosophy proceeds from natural reason and is concerned with the objects accessible to this. Notwithstanding their differences, this work establishes that there is a nexus between both disciplines. Moreover, since God both created the world which is accessible to philosophy and revealed the text which is accessible to theologians, the claims yielded by one cannot conflict the claims yielded by the other unless the philosopher or theologian has made some prior error.

Introduction

A cursory analysis of the historical evolution of Philosophy and Theology, even the most radical and primary histories of both

disciplines, reveal an ‘ecstatic’ romance successfully penetrating to the very basis of their real existence. This becomes even more evident from Karl Rahner’s analysis of Philosophy and Theology: ‘there is a theological element inescapably present in every philosophy’^{xxx}. There lies concealed in every philosophy right from its beginnings a theology which is either unreflectingly accepted or rejected in a manner which is culpable. These notwithstanding, what is philosophy? What is theology? What are their points of convergence and divergence? Are they of any importance to the intellectual formation of a theologian? These and more are the basic preoccupations of this piece.

THE CONCEPT OF PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy is from two Greek words: φίλο (*philo*) meaning *love* and σοφία (*sophia*) meaning *wisdom*. Brought together, it means the love of wisdom. The concept is a neologism attributed to Pythagoras; it literally means “the love of wisdom”. This presents philosophy as a high and supreme achievement of man, and philosophers as aspirants to or proponents of wisdom. In this relatively strict sense, philosophy implies both the process of questioning and the results of this interrogation as embodied in a personal or public enterprise of value to mankind^{xxx}.

Strictly speaking, there is no definition of philosophy that is agreed upon by all philosophers. However, the Classical and Scholastic tradition and of course the Modern tradition have views of philosophy that are commonly accepted. Thinkers in the Classical and Scholastic tradition tend to regard philosophy as a habit of the mind or a body of natural knowledge that results from the use of special methods which enables one to explain in a more or less profound way the sum of human experiences. It is acquired systematically and takes as its beginning ordinary experience^{xxx}.

Modern tradition concur that philosophy is a reflection on the subject's experience; it is the response of the self to whatever appears to be non-self. Their concept of philosophy is thus explained in terms of the interrelationship between the subject and object, thus, the confrontation of the subject and object is understood as what generates the philosophical content^{xxx}.

THE CONCEPT OF THEOLOGY

The concept theology is from two Greek words Θεο (God) and λογία (study). Brought together, it means the study of God. Far back in history, Plato understood theology as an instrument for demythologizing the Greek Poets^{xxx}. Aristotle on his part saw theology as an aspect of philosophy that explains the cosmos in

terms of an Unmoved Mover^{xxx}. When theology began to assume a Christian tone, Origen defined theology as a tool for expressing the Christian understanding of God as distinguished from Christian faith. St Thomas Aquinas, while working out the theory of theology used the concept in the context of a methodical elaboration of the truth of divine revelation by reason enlightened by faith. He understood theology as the science of Christian faith.

These notwithstanding, theology in the Christian context may be defined in the words of St Anselm as “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quarens intellectus*). It is a branch of learning in which the Christian, using his reason enlightened by divine faith, seeks to understand the mysteries of God revealed in and through history (Ephesians 1:9). These mysteries encapsulate the revelation of God himself and his love for humanity – mysteries hidden in God but revealed to humanity through the spirit (1 Cor 2:7-16).

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

It is the popular opinion of Plato^{xxx} and Aristotle^{xxx} that the desire to know, begotten by wonder at the marvels of nature led people to philosophize. Before the advent of philosophy,

credulous acceptance of the theogonies and mythological cosmologies dominated, creating a background for the advent of Greek Philosophy, which began as a reaction to such dogmatism. Then, people took experience rather than tradition as the starting point of their thought. Thinkers like Thales and Pythagoras began to search for the one source φύσις (nature) whence came the particulars of everyday experience^{xxx}.

With the likes of Plato and Aristotle, Philosophy embraced the Classical Era when it passed from the physical world to the contemplation of metaphysical realities^{xxx}. The conquests of Alexandra initiated the Post-Aristotelian period, when Philosophy took a political dimension, emphasizing the commonwealth of humanity.

History witnessed the dawn of Medieval Philosophy with its spirit of theocentricism. The Patristics began the first dialogue between Philosophy and Christianity. Modern philosophy ranges from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th C. The Philosophy of this period reflects a scientific character, emphasizing the powerfulness of the rational faculty of the human person.

As regards contemporary philosophy, apart from the concern with science, philosophers in the 21st C have become

increasingly aware of the human and his or her problems. Instead of concentrating solely on the being of all things, these philosophers philosophized about the human person and his or her experience in everyday world. They designate the human person as historical, as consciousness, as transcendence, and in general as a being in process towards a future, and the human is the responsible author of his or her future, with or without God.

While philosophy began by wonder at the marvels of nature, theology began with the self-conscious faith in God. As soon as human beings began thinking about the ultimate meaning of life, about their relationship to the whole cosmos, about the ultimate purpose and direction of human history, about the experience of the holy and the sacred, they were beginning to do theology. As such, theology precedes not only Christianity but even Judaism as well.

Christian theology, however, begins with the apostles, because the apostles had to reconcile themselves with the message of Christ and because they had to preach the Good News. With the edict of Constantinople in 313, the Church acquired a legal status and its theology began to show the marks of the Church's new situation. This was influenced by Neo-Platonism and the Roman Juridical thought.

As circumstances changed, so too did the character of theology. With the desolation of the Roman Empire in 476 and breakdown of traditional social and political institutions, theology passed to the Monasteries and to Monastic Theologians like St Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux etc.

With time, those who were formed in the spirituality of the monasteries found it most difficult to accept. A new theological enterprise then began to emerge from the universities headed by figures like Albert the Great. This spelled the emergence of scholastic theology. As controversy followed controversy, the role of universities as centers of theological thought declined and was replaced by seminaries and schools of religious orders.

The 19th C witnessed a theological transformation, which recovered a sense of history and a sense of the Christian message as an organic whole rather than a collection of theses. However, the modern overthrow of theocentricism interrupted the course of this new historical and integrated approach of theology. It denied the capacity of the human mind to grasp and express the supernatural in ways that are open to objective examination.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

In the hemisphere of Western thought until the medieval ages, there was no clear-cut distinction between the disciplines of Philosophy and theology; they were often conceived as the same discipline. However, with the dawn of the history of Christian theology, philosophy was sometimes seen as a natural complement of theological reflection, while at other times the advocates for the two disciplines have regarded each other as mortal enemies. Tertullain (c. 160-c.230) disparaged philosophy, seeing it as dangerous as well as useless for the faithful. He asked: “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What accord is there between the academy and the church? What is between heretics and Christians?”^{xxx}. Others took a more nuanced and conciliatory line. Justin the Martyr (c.110-c.165), for example was struck by the similarity between Greek philosophy and the Christian worldview^{xxx}. An even more exalted view of Greek philosophy is found in the writings of St Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215), who emphasized the role of philosophy as a preparatory science for Christianity^{xxx}.

However, at the dawn of theocentricism, which signifies the spirit of the medieval epoch, glaring distinctions began to emerge between the two disciplines. By 1100 AD Abelard had begun this

distinction when he identified theology with the primary task of methodical investigation of the whole Christian teaching. This distinction came to its full emergence when St Thomas Aquinas worked out the theory of theology as a science of revealed truths, carefully distinguishing theology from philosophy, as such describing a model for the relationship between philosophy and theology^{xxx}. According to the Thomistic model, philosophy and theology are distinct enterprises, the primary difference between the two being their intellectual starting points. Philosophy takes as its data the deliverance of our natural mental faculties: what we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. Theology takes as its starting point the divine revelations of God. Philosophy as such becomes an autonomous discipline, and its secularization, its emancipation, constitutes the first step in the legitimate process by which the world is allowed to become ‘worldly’^{xxx}. Philosophy is the field of theories, systems and hypotheses, each person can say and maintain whatever he likes. He can assign to it the most astronomical nominal value, even to the point of saying that it has the value of “the truth”. Orthodox Theology is a different matter from the beginning to the end. It does not assert a proposition; it bears witness. It is not contradiction but confession^{xxx}. Theology starts from a fact: revelation. “God has spoken to us through his son” (Heb 1:2). While philosophy starts

from an idea, for the theologian, the point of departure is Christ, and it is also the point of arrival^{xxx}.

This distinction notwithstanding, does theology as a separate discipline have any relationship with philosophy? The answer is in the affirmative, because Theology necessarily entails thinking, and thinking as such takes place outside the realm of theology. And provided that this thinking is at a radical level, provided that it touches upon the human person in his or her wholeness, provided it reaches to the level of mystery and faces up to it, provided it considers itself and not merely the things about us, it involves the free interplay of the philosophical discipline^{xxx}.

For the theologian, the human person is the recipient of revelation which is objectified and institutionalized as a historical phenomenon, and as such the human person is precisely not a *tabula rasa*, not some *materia prima* having nothing of his or her own to contribute to this revelation. In the very process of making revelation his or her own he or she must recognize in himself or herself that he or she is, from the outset, bringing something positive of his or her own to bear upon this revelation. Regarded as a discipline designed to achieve reflective and critical understanding of revelation, therefore theology includes,

as an intrinsic element and not merely an external prior condition^{xxx}.

Theology must maintain a direct dialogue with philosophy; this explains why alongside a theological faculty a philosophical faculty is raised. And this the theologian welcomes because everything human belongs to God, and only so is it truly appropriated to us, and because in the midst of all philosophy the theologian discerns God revealing himself in grace, and since God both created the world which is accessible to philosophy and revealed the text which is accessible to theologians, the claims yielded by one cannot conflict the claims yielded by the other unless the philosopher or theologian has made some prior error^{xxx}.

THE RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE FORMATION OF A THEOLOGIAN

In 1879, Leo XIII issued an Encyclical Letter on *The Restoration of Christian Philosophy*. In this document, he made an edifying statement which admits of the significance of Philosophy in the life of the theologian:

Philosophy if rightly made use of by the wise, in a certain way tends to smooth and fortify the road to

true faith, and to prepare the souls of its disciples for the fit reception of revelation; for which reason is well called by ancient writers sometimes a stepping stone to the Christian faith; sometimes the help and prelude of Christianity, sometimes the Gospel teacher^{xxx}.

This Philosophical formation prepares the theologian for a deeper understanding of faith which is the *habitus* of theology, and of the human person and the phenomenon and lines of development of society, in relation to the pastoral ministry which is incarnate and contemporaneous. As Paul VI once said, “Christ became the contemporary of some men and spoke their language. Our faithfulness to him demands that this contemporaneousness should be maintained”^{xxx}. This contemporaneousness required of the theologian is ensured by a Philosophical network.

A proper philosophical training is vital for the theologian, not only because of the links between the great philosophical questions and the mysteries of salvation which are studied in theology under the guidance of the higher light of faith, but also vis-à-vis an extremely widespread cultural situation which emphasizes subjectivism as a measure and criterion of truth: only a sound philosophy can help the theologian develop a reflective awareness of the fundamental relationship that exists between the

human spirit and truth, and that truth which is revealed to us fully in Christ Jesus^{xxx}.

Philosophy, undoubtedly, greatly helps the theologian to enrich his or her intellectual formation in the ‘cult of truth’, namely a kind of loving veneration of truth, which leads one to realize that the truth is not created or measured by human beings, but is given to human beings as a gift by the Supreme Truth, God; that albeit in a difficult way and often with difficulty, human reason can reach objective and universal truth^{xxx}.

While philosophy does all these, theology on her part helps the theologian to balance his or her human and spiritual formation by giving the avenue to participate in the light of God’s mind so that he or she acquires a wisdom which is in turn open to and directed towards knowing and adhering to God, because true theology proceeds from faith and aims at leading to faith which is the *habitus* of theology. The study of theology has a christological and ecclesial dimension, which are connatural to theology, helping the theologian to grow in scientific precision, and to develop a living love for Jesus Christ and for the church. This love will both nourish their spiritual life and guide them to carry out their ministry with a generous spirit.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is constructive to say that through the instrumentality of philosophy, theology is able to proceed towards understanding religious experiences. Philosophy brings forth a reasonable and loving consideration of the realities of revelation, of the symbols in terms of which the revelation is humanly expressed. It is therefore not surprising that the early theologians, while strongly biblical in inspiration and content, were nourished with a great deal of reasoning, closely allied to the Philosophers of the past and of their times. Through Philosophy they were able to make religious experience relevant to the lives and ideas of their contemporaries, all because they were aware that they were involved in a world of human culture and knowledge. They employed several philosophical themes, which were highly honoured in the court of reason; as such, they made the revelation of Christ relevant to their adherents and won many souls for Christ.

ENDNOTES

ⁱKarl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Vol. 13* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), p.64

ⁱⁱE A Maziarz, '*Philosophy*', in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia Vol II*, (London: Chapman, 1987), p 296

ⁱⁱⁱE A Maziarz, '*Philosophy*', p.297

^{iv}E A Maziarz, '*Philosophy*', p. 297

- ^vPlato, *The Republic*, 379. A. Retrieved 20th May 2011. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Republic_\(Plato\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Republic_(Plato))
- ^{vi}Plato, *Metaphysics* 1026. A. Retrieved 20th May 2011. <http://search.sweetim.com/search.asp?q=Metaphysics+Plato&ln=en&src=1002&sf=0>
- ^{vii}Plato, *Theaet.* 155. Retrieved 20th May 2011. <http://search.sweetim.com/search.asp?q=plato%27s%20theater&ln=en&src=1002&lcr=0>
- ^{viii}Plato, *Metaphysics*, 980 a. 22
- ^{ix}E A Maziarz, 'Philosophy', p. 303
- ^xE A Maziarz, 'Philosophy', p 304
- ^{xi}Tertullian, *The Prescriptions against heretics*, Trans. Peter Holmes, chapter 7. (London: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), p. 246
- ^{xii}A. J Droge, *Justin Martyr and the Restoration of Philosophy* (London: Variorum, 1982), pp. 293-94
- ^{xiii}Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, Book 1-3, Trans. John Ferguson. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), p.42
- ^{xiv}E A Maziarz, 'Philosophy', p. 39
- ^{xv}Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Vol. 13*, p 77
- ^{xvi}*Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and life of the Orthodox Church*, Trans. Elizabeth Briere (NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), p.23
- ^{xvii}*Orthodox Theology, An Introduction*, Trans. Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson, Crestwood (NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), pp. 18-19
- ^{xviii}Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Vol. 13*, 76
- ^{xix}Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Vol. 13*, p. 76
- ^{xx}Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Vol. 13*, p. 79
- ^{xxi}Leo XIII, *The Restoration of Christian Philosophy*, 1, 879. Retrieved 20th. <http://search.sweetim.com/search.asp?src=2&q=On+the+restoration+of+philosophy%2C+Leo+XIII>

^{xxii}Paul VI, *Address to the participants in the 21st Italian Biblical Week*. 25th September 1970. No. 62

^{xxiii}Pope John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Pastores Dabos Vobis*, 52)

^{xxiv}St Augustine, *De Trinitate* XV, 28