



## A perspective on the romance between philosophy and theology

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 the product of Karl Rahner's analysis of the Philosophy and Theology: 'there is a theological element inescapably present in every philosophy'[1]. This is quite instructive from the very fact that 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 the seminarian? These and more are the basic preoccupations of this piece.

### **THE CONCEPT OF PHILOSOPHY**

Philosophy is of Greek origin, φιλοσοφία. 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[2].

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 and that 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[3].

Modern tradition concurs 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; as such, the confrontation of the subject and object is what generates



the philosophical content[4].

### **THE CONCEPT OF THEOLOGY**

The concept theology is from the Greek word Θεολογία, in the sense of the rationale (λογος) of the Gods. Far back in history, Plato understood theology as an instrument for demythologizing the Greek Poets[5]. Aristotle on his part saw theology as an aspect of philosophy that explains the cosmos in terms of an Unmoved Mover[6]. 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: briefly 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 quaerens 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 encapsulates the revelation of God himself and his love for man - mysteries hidden in God but revealed to men through the spirit (1 Cor 2:7-16).

### **THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY**

As regards philosophy, it is the popular opinions of Plato[7] and Aristotle[8] that the desire to know , begotten by wonder at the marvels of nature led men to philosophize.

Not all human thought is philosophical, it must involve a penetration into the essence of reality. Before the advent of philosophy, credulous acceptance of the theogonies and mythological cosmologies dominated, creating a background for the advent of Greek Philosophy. Greek Philosophy began as a reaction to such dogmatism, when men took experience rather than tradition as the starting point of their thought. Then thinkers like Thales and Pythagoras began to search for the one source φύσις (nature) whence came the particulars of everyday experience[9].

With the likes of Plato and Aristotle Philosophy embraced the Classical Era when



## A perspective on the romance between philosophy and theology

Philosophy passed from the physical world to the contemplation of metaphysical realities[10]. The conquests of Alexandra initiated the Post-Aristotelian period, when Philosophy took a political dimension, emphasizing the commonwealth of men.

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, and emphasizing the powerfulness of the rational faculty of man.

As regards contemporary philosophy, apart from the concern with science, philosophers in the 21st C have become increasingly aware of man and his problems. Instead of concentrating solely on the being of all things, these philosophers philosophize about man and his experience in everyday world. They designate man as historical, as consciousness, as transcendence, and in general as a being in process towards a future, and man is the responsible author of his future, with or without God.

While philosophy began by wonder at the marvels of nature, Theology is as old as self-conscious faith in God. As soon as man 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. 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. It was influenced by Neo-Platonism, and by Roman Juridical thought.

As circumstances changed, so too did the character of Catholic 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, Benard of Clairvaux etc.



## A perspective on the romance between philosophy and theology

With time, those who were formed in the spirituality of the monasteries found it most difficult to accept. New theology then began to emerge from the universities headed by figures like Albert the Great. This was when scholastic theology emerged. As controversy followed controversy, the role of universities as centers of theological thought declined, and were replaced by seminaries and schools of religious orders. Manuals of theology became popular with the intention of wedding positive historical element with the speculative, rational element.

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 crisis of the 19th C and early 20th C interrupted the course of this new historical and integrated approach of catholic theology. This period deny 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 Sphere 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 compliment 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?"[11]. 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[12]. 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[13].

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 began this distinction when he identified theology with the primary



## A perspective on the romance between philosophy and theology

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[14]. 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'[15]. 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[16]. 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[17].

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 takes place outside the realm of theology. And provided that this thinking is at a radical level, provided that it touches upon man in his 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[18].

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



includes, as an intrinsic element and not merely an external prior condition, man's philosophical understanding of himself[19].

Theology must maintain a direct dialogue with philosophy; this explains why along side 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 man, 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[20].

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF PHILOSOPHY IN PRIESTLY FORMATION**

In 1879, Pope Leo XIII issued an Encyclical Letter on The Restoration of Philosophy. In this encyclical he made an edifying statement which admits of the significance of Philosophy in the life of the to-be minister:

'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.'"[21]

This Philosophical formation prepares the candidate for the priesthood for a deeper understanding of faith which is the habitus of theology, of man and the phenomenon and lines of development of society, in relation to the pastoral ministry which is incarnate and contemporaneous. As Pope 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"[22]. This contemporaneousness required of the minister is ensured by Philosophical network.

In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Pope John Paul II, in discussing about the intellectual formation of the candidates for the priesthood pointed out that "a crucial stage of intellectual formation is the study of philosophy". This cruciality is drawn from the fact that philosophy leads to a better understanding and



## A perspective on the romance between philosophy and theology

interpretation of the person, and of the person's freedom and relationships with the world and with God. This opens the candidates horizon for the elaboration and study of the sacra doctrina.

A proper philosophical training is also vital, 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 candidates for the priesthood to 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[23].

Philosophy, undoubtedly, greatly helps the candidate to enrich his 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 man, but is given to man 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[24].

While philosophy does all these, theology on her part helps the candidate for the priesthood to balance his human and spiritual formation by giving him the avenue to participate in the light of God's mind so that he 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 candidate for the priesthood to grow in scientific precision, and to develop a living love for Jesus Christ and for his church. This love will both nourish their spiritual life and guide them to carry out their ministry with a generous spirit. This was what the second Vatican council had in mind when it called for a revision of ecclesiastical studies, with a view to 'a more effective coordination of philosophy and theology so that they supplement one another in revealing to the minds of the students with ever increasing clarity the mystery of Christ, which affect the unceasing influence of the Church, and operates mainly through the ministry of the priest'[25].



## 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 Fathers of the Church, while strongly biblical in inspiration and content, was 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.

---

### Notes

- [1] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Vol 13*, London : Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974, p.64
- [2] E A Maziarz, 'Philosophy', in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia Vol II*, London : Chapman Ltd, 1987, p 296
- [3] E A Maziarz, *Op. Cit No. II*, pg 296
- [4] *Ibid* p 297
- [5] Republic 379. A
- [6] *Metaphysics* 1026. A
- [7] *Theaet.* 155
- [8] *Metaphysics* 980 a. 22
- [9] E A Maziarz, *Op.Cit*, p. 303
- [10] *Ibid* p 304
- [11] Tertullian, *The Prescriptions against heretics*, Trans. Peter Holmes, chapter 7 Grand rapids , MI : Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), Vol.3, p. 246
- [12] A. J Droge, *Justin Martyr and the Restoration of Philosophy*, (London: Variorum Reprints, 1982), pp. 293-94
- [13] Clement of Alexandria , *Stromateis*, Book 1-3, Trans. John Ferguson (Washington, DC: The catholic University of America Press, 1991), Book 1, Ch 5, p.42





## A perspective on the romance between philosophy and theology

[14] E A Maziarz, Op.Cit, pg 39

[15] Karl Rahner Op. Cit, p 77

[16] Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and life of the Orthodox Church, Trans. Elizabeth Briere, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984, p.23

[17] Orthodox Theology, An Introduction, Trans. Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978, pp. 18-19

[18] Karl Rahner Op.Cit, 76

[19] Ibid. p. 76

[20] Ibid. p. 79

[21] Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter on The Restoration of Philosophy, 1 879.

[22] Pope Paul Vi, Address to the participants in the 21st Italian Biblical Week ( 25th September 1970 ): 62

[23] Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Pastores Dabos Vobis, 52)

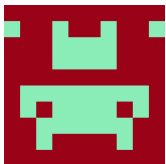
[24] De Trinitate XV, 28

[25] Decree on Priestly formation Optatam Totiu, 14

Author

Recent Posts

---



Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony

---