

SCHOLASTICISM—ITS RELATION TO AUTHORITY

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DESIRING to create a more sympathetic understanding and to establish a closer and ameliorative coöperation in the domain of philosophy, Dr. J. S. Zybura recently invited the professors of philosophy in the prominent non-Catholic universities of our own country, Great Britain and Canada, to submit their opinions on several points drawn up in the form of a questionnaire. These interrogations were concerned with the attitude of contemporary non-Scholastic thinkers towards the method, content and applicability of Neo-Scholasticism to present-day problems. The questionnaire also inquired as to the probability of an early *rapprochement* between Neo-Scholasticism and modern systems of thought. A symposium, made up of the responses to this inquiry together with contributions from Old and New World Scholastics, was published by Dr. Zybura in his admirable *Present Day Thinkers and the New Scholasticism*. Some of the criticism of the scholastic discipline are laudatory; most of them, at least in part, are adverse. Among the latter we find the objection, emphasized by repetition, that Scholasticism is subservient to the dogmatic teaching of the Church.

The author of the work just noted, in considering this accusation, writes: "The objection receives various formulations, but the one idea of dependence on ecclesiastical authority underlies and motivates them all: Scholastic philosophy is identified with theological dogmas; its outcome is determined in advance by the principle of authority; it is admittedly 'the handmaid of theology'; it is essentially an apologetic system; Scholastics are not thinking for themselves, but merely re-editing a system accepted on non-philosophic grounds; they are not free to follow the argument whithersoever it leads, but are guided by theological prepossessions; hence discussion with them is futile and their processes of reasoning are felt to be an empty show."¹ This is a serious allegation. If it be true, Scholastics are not philosophers but apologists and philosophical triflers. Is it true? The Church makes no pretensions to govern the intellectual activity of her subjects unless their investigations carry them into the domain of faith.

¹ J. S. Zybura, *Present Day Thinkers and the New Scholasticism*, p. 117.

Hence, the question in the final analysis is, what is the Scholastic interpretation of the relation of faith and reason, theology and philosophy, and does this interpretation merit the destructive criticism of which it has been the object?

If the objection of contemporary philosophers were leveled against the Apologists and constructive thinkers of the Patristic Age it would be substantiated, but only partially, by reality. It is true that in the exposition of dogmas of faith, the extent to which reason may be employed was not clearly determined by them, and at times Sacred Scripture was utilized to substantiate philosophical doctrine. But even in these cases the commingling of theology and philosophy was not the result of a blind, unreasoning assent to authority. In Greek philosophy these men found many truths which were also contained in revelation. The existence of a Supreme Being may be cited as an example of this. The doctrines, although revealed, had been attained to by the ancient thinkers by the natural light of reason. The Apologists do not seem to have clearly distinguished between these truths as they are revealed doctrines, and as they are naturally knowable. The partial confusion, in some instances, of faith and reason, theology and philosophy followed.

The first beginnings of Scholasticism are seen, according to some historians of philosophy, in Scotus Erigena in the ninth century. Erigena identified faith and reason; he "theosophized philosophy," but it was not this characteristic which constituted him a forerunner of the Scholastic school. He is associated with Scholasticism because he endeavored to find the true relation which exists between faith and reason. He concluded that they must be identified and in so doing he became, on this point, "anti-Scholastic," just as by his pantheistic doctrines he became anti-Scholastic.

Two centuries later, when Scholasticism was assuming a more definite form, we find St. Anselm endeavoring to solve the problem. True, he did not completely succeed, but by his rational method he determined the limits of theology and philosophy more definitely than any antecedent philosopher. It is interesting and important to note that St. Anselm is styled the "Father of Scholasticism," not only in view of the completeness of his philosophical doctrine, but principally because of this rational method which posited the line of demarcation between the realms of faith and reason. Today Scholastics are accused of the "philosophical sin" of Scotus Erigena, but in point of fact their interpretation of reason's relation to faith is the perfected rational method of their Father. Scholasticism is not Fideism;

neither is it Rationalism.² It is a synthesis of the truth embodied in both disciplines. The latter system apotheosizes reason; the former refuses to recognize its powers. Scholasticism, preserving the dignity of reason, admits, under certain circumstances, the force of dogma.

Thus we see that the thinkers of the Patristic Age, naturally enough, partially confused theology and philosophy; that Erigena, because he *tried* to solve the problem, is considered a forerunner of Scholasticism, but because he *failed* to do so, is in this respect, opposed to the Scholastic school; finally that St. Anselm gave a more perfect solution to the question than any of his predecessors, and for this reason is honored with the title, "Father of Scholastic Philosophy."

It was left to the Prince of Theologians in the thirteenth century to accurately define the limits of faith and reason and thus to establish the true relation of theology and philosophy. Contact without opposition, distinction without segregation, reciprocity without intrinsic dependence or identification, absolute autonomy in their proper spheres—this is, in epitome, the order existing between the two sciences as enunciated by St. Thomas, and as it is understood by present day Scholastics. Let us briefly develop this summary.

To maintain that the truths attained by reason can be opposed to revealed doctrine is tantamount to a denial of God. For it is He Who has revealed, it is He Who has given the light of reason to man. Hence, if there existed a *real* opposition between the findings of reason and the content of revelation, God would be the author of error, He would not be God.³ Unless a man be an Atheist he must admit the impossibility of any opposition between the two spheres of knowledge. If he is an Atheist? As we shall see, even then he may not accuse us of being unphilosophical. Now, does this conformity of theology and philosophy justify the interaction allowed by Scholastics between them? May we permit theology and philosophy to aid each other after we have shown that no contradiction exists between the two sciences, or should they be separated such as, for instance, mathematics and biology? Scholastics maintain: "There are truths which belong exclusively to theology (supernatural mysteries); there are truths which belong properly to philosophy (with no reference to man's destiny or his relation to God); and there are truths which are common to both sciences (possible of attainment by

² Turner, *History of Philosophy*, p. 419.

³ St. Thomas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1, 7.

reason but proposed for our belief)."⁴ The first class is the proper object of faith; the second, is the proper object of reason; the third falls within the province of both faith and reason.

There is no difficulty in regard to truths which pertain to philosophy alone, and in consequence are exclusively the object of reason. Ecclesiastical authority does not interfere unless a question of faith is either directly or indirectly involved, and truths of this class exclude the possibility of such an affinity. It is evident that in this case there is both distinction and segregation, and faith is not placed as a norm to be followed. Anyone who possesses even a nodding acquaintance with the philosophy of Catholic authors is abundantly aware of the wide divergence existing between their purely philosophical doctrines. Thomism, the school of Duns Scotus, the Molinistic discipline, Neo-Scholasticism—what are these but systems of thought bearing diverse names because representing diverse doctrines? Reason then is autonomous in its proper sphere.

We shall consider, in conjunction, the other classes of truths; namely, the purely supernatural and those doctrines which, although possible of attainment by reason alone, have been revealed. Before doing so, for the sake of clarity, let us consider one point which pertains to supernatural truths in particular. Now, although purely supernatural truths belong strictly to the realm of faith and theology, this does not preclude the permissibility of a philosophical consideration of these truths. A philosopher, as such, may deliberate upon supernatural truths and accept these mysteries if they do not violate the dictates of reason. A denial of this right is an unreasonable inhibition of a means to attain truth, and those who do object to this right *ipso facto* condemn their own manner of philosophizing. An example will make this clear. When a *philosopher* of the Catholic Faith treats of the Blessed Trinity he investigates its possibility or impossibility, its concordance to, or dissonance from, reason. When a philosopher who does not profess the Catholic Religion deals with the question of a Triune God, he also merely seeks for harmony or lack of harmony with reason. The attitude of both philosophers is identical with the position that they assume when investigating the theory of the fourth dimension—a possibility. If a thinker with Catholic connections accepts the dogma of the Blessed Trinity on authority, he does so not as a *philosopher* but as a *theologian*. A philosopher who believes a premise is a contradiction. Certainly the

⁴ Turner, op. cit. p. 349.

position of Scholastics on this point should not be repugnant even to the pragmatic and positivistic temper of some of our modern savants. They may name it futile, but they may not reasonably deny its philosophical soundness. So much for supernatural truths in particular.

Thus far, in the development of the above epitome of the doctrine of St. Thomas on this point, we have seen that no opposition exists between faith and reason; that ecclesiastical authority does not interfere unless there arises a question pertaining directly or indirectly to faith and that, in consequence, there are truths which pertain to philosophy alone. Finally, we have seen that a philosopher, as such, is perfectly within his rights when he considers strictly supernatural truths to determine whether or not they are opposed to the dictates of reason. We shall now consider purely supernatural truths in conjunction with doctrines which have been revealed but which are able to be known by reason alone.

Between faith and reason there exists a reciprocal relation without identification. "Faith frees and saves reason from error and endows it with manifold knowledge."⁵ This is in succinct form, the teaching of St. Thomas and Scholastics concerning the influence exercised by faith on reason. It is, moreover, one of the causes of the association of dogma and philosophy. Faith opens the way to an entirely new field of knowledge, for supernatural truths, e. g., the Incarnation, precisely because they are supernatural, could never be attained to without revelation. And, abstracting from faith, the natural truths e. g., the immortality of the soul, which *de facto* have been revealed would be known, it is true, but they would be perceived only by a few, after extensive study and many errors would tincture the truth thus laboriously acquired.⁶ The difficulties encountered by the ancient Greek philosophers plainly manifest this fact. Plato and Aristotle, two of the world's greatest thinkers, arrived at the idea of a Supreme Being by the natural light of reason, but even their master-minds could produce only a confused concept of this Being. Now, since the knowledge of these truths is a means necessary for the attainment of our supernatural end, we see that this knowledge

⁵ Vatican Council; Denz. 1799.

⁶ St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica* Ia, Q. I, art. I, c. Vatican Council, Sess. 3, c. 2:

"Huic divinae revelationi tribuendum quidem est, ut ea quae in rebus divinis humanae rationi per se impervia non sunt, in praesenti quoque generis humani conditione ab omnibus expedite, firma certitudine, et nullo admixto errore, cognosci possint."

is of superlative importance. Faith gives it to us by proposing the truths as objects of belief.⁷ Our attitude towards the teachings of faith is similar to that assumed by a child when working out a problem in arithmetic. If the solution arrived at is not in conformity with the answer found in the book, the child does not conclude that he is correct and the author in error. Neither does he consider his reason to be hampered. The difference between the action of the child and our own, lies in the authority on which they are based. The child submits to the human authority of the author of the book; our acceptance is motivated by divine authority. According to a Scholastic principle, "we believe that we may understand."

A second reason for the association of philosophy and dogma lies in the benefits accruing to faith as a result of this union. The faith of a theologian is not merely a sentimental impulse, a vague religious emotion. It is a firm, intellectual conviction based on the fact that God has spoken. He has made a revelation; deception is repugnant to His nature; therefore, the theologian believes. Obviously, if his faith is to be reasonable, it must be preceded by a rational investigation of the preambles of faith; such as, the truths of God's existence and veracity, the fact that He has made a revelation. As expressed by another Scholastic formula, "we understand that we may believe," and reason is employed as the means to this end. Those who would object to the association of faith and reason would be the first to declaim an unreasonable faith were we to exclude the position allotted to reason in a theologian's act of faith.

Philosophy not only gives us reasons for our belief, but it also plays an apologetical role. It defends dogma, either by positively proving the reasonableness of what we believe, as it does in the case of the immortality of the soul, or by showing that the objections of an opponent do not prove the unreasonableness of the doctrine, as may be seen relative to the Blessed Trinity. Is there anything wrong in this? May we not, must we not defend our actions as reasonable under the penalty of relinquishing our claim to a rational nature? It is precisely because it pertains to our nature to proceed in this manner that, not only Scholastic philosophers, but thinkers of all beliefs and no belief have ever employed reason to defend their religious views. As Leo XIII has observed in his Encyclical *Aeterni Patris*: "For as the enemies of the Catholic name, when about to attack religion are in the habit of borrowing their weapons from the arguments of philos-

⁷ Saint Thomas, loc. cit.

ophers, so the defenders of sacred science draw many arguments from the store of philosophy which may serve to uphold revealed dogma." If a Scholastic were to ask an Atheist why he denies God's existence, the unbeliever would attempt to explain his position by an appeal to philosophy. If a Scholastic were to ask a contemporary thinker why he does not admit a Triune God, philosophy would again be resorted to. Then why the expostulations when the Scholastic employs reason to justify his religious convictions? Is a philosopher of the Scholastic school a theological Midas who by his touch converts reason into faith?

To sum up: There exists no opposition between faith and reason. Reason reigns supreme in its proper field. Faith is autonomous in the sphere of knowledge belonging to it alone, but because the science of philosophy seeks the last causes of every knowable entity it has the right to investigate the possibility or impossibility of supernatural truths. Finally, there is a domain of knowledge common to both faith and reason. In this field, philosophy and theology are not identified but are two distinct sciences between which there exists a correlative relation. The philosopher enables the theologian reasonably to accept the content of revelation. The theologian gives the philosopher the protective norm of faith.

The assertion of non-Scholastic thinkers that our processes of reasoning are an empty show and discussion with us is futile, would be true if our philosophy were subjected unreservedly to ecclesiastical authority. Does such a blind subservience exist? No; for if it did its effect would be twofold: Scholastics would merit the contempt of their associates in the field of philosophical thought, and ecclesiastical authority would defeat its purpose in adopting the Scholastic system. The end it has in view is to prove to others that faith is reasonable, and if authority converts reason into blind obedience, no rational person would expect this end to be accomplished.

Joseph the Just

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Silent, patient in his labors,
Ever faithful to his trust,
In the morn, at noon, at even,
Was Saint Joseph ever Just.