

IS THERE A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY?

MARK EGAN, O.P.



HILOSOPHY is a living science. Like life, it is allured by different interests at different times. Now it is gazing out at the world, asking what is underneath the moving panorama of external phenomena. Again it turns its gaze within, seeking the fixed and permanent amid the welter of thoughts, images, sensations and desires of man's inner life. But always it returns to certain problems, almost as regularly as life returns to its springtime, then to restore its vitality.

I

One of these recurring intrusions into the quiet course of philosophic speculation is the question of the relation that exists between faith and reason, philosophy and theology. It did not come into prominence until the advent of Christianity. For Christ brought to man a set of truths which were utterly beyond the grasp of human reason. When man accepted this revelation he had within him two sources of knowledge: one proceeded from his own reason; the other came directly from God, which he could view only with the help of a supernatural light—the light of faith. From these two sources have sprung mighty torrents which continue to flow down through the ages. It was not long before the question arose: have these two streams been restrained within their own banks, or have they overflowed their boundaries and intermingled? Modern philosophers will have nothing to do with scholastic philosophy because, they say, the pure waters of reason have been polluted with an overflow from the waters of faith and the philosophy sponsored by the Catholic Church is unworthy of the name philosophy, for it is completely dominated by the authority of Catholic Dogma and prejudiced from the start.

The limits of faith and reason were luminously exposed by St. Thomas Aquinas. The present discussion is an attempt to apply his principles to certain phases of the problem. Renewed interest in this question was aroused in 1931, at a meeting of the Société française

de Philosophie. M. Gilson made a communication to this society on the historical influence of Christianity on philosophy. At the meeting, M. Brehier opposed the thesis of M. Gilson. Later, in an article in the *Revue de Metaphysique et Morale*, M. Brehier expanded his own contention that there has been no real Christian philosophy, any more than there has been a Christian mathematics or a Christian physics. M. Gilson's lectures on *L'esprit de la Philosophie medievale* are entirely devoted to an investigation of the factual contributions of Christianity to philosophy. The question was taken up by M. Jacques Maritain who attempted to explain this influence and defend its legitimacy. Interest was so aroused that the Société Thomiste dedicated its annual meeting to a discussion of Christian philosophy. In a recent issue of the *Revue Néo-Scholastique de Philosophie* a resumé of the discussion held at this meeting was given by F. Van Steenberghen. In this article we wish to present some of the problems raised and summarize the solutions given to them.

II

Though the debates have been centered around the legitimacy of the epithet Christian as applied to philosophy, they have not been mere verbal discussions. If Christianity has had an influence on philosophy; if philosophy can come into contact with faith and still remain philosophy, then there may be ground for asserting that a Christian philosophy exists and is a true rational synthesis.

Lest we mistake the real meaning of the words Christian Philosophy, it may be well to quote the following from R. P. Sertillanges, O.P., to which all assent:

Formally speaking, and in the entire rigor of the term, there is not, there cannot be a Christian philosophy. This substantive, philosophy, and this adjective, Christian, are essentially disparate, and can be united only under some secondary aspect, though that be a true one. Philosophy is a doctrine founded on reason, proceeding by demonstration alone, and of itself cognizant of objects attainable by reason. When you add "Christian" you say that the doctrine is founded on faith, proposes objects of faith and reasons by virtue of the light of faith. There is a contradiction.¹

M. Gilson, in the work already mentioned, has shown the historical relations between philosophy and Christianity. He has gone back to the sources of the two streams of faith and reason. Following the course of the waters of reason, he has detected its great expansion after the advent of Christianity. He has discovered that the

¹ *La Vie Intellectuelle* XXIV (1933) No. 1, p. 9.

knowledge of the Judeo-Christian God—He Who is—gave philosophers a profound grasp of the concept of being. All the developments which philosophy underwent after the advent of Christ are inexplicable if the influence of Christianity on philosophy is denied. Hence, in M. Gilson's thought, a philosophy is called Christian when it receives from revelation problems, concepts, presuppositions, challenges, in a word, a fecundity it did not possess, and, indeed, could never have possessed.

III

It seems very evident that Christianity has been a pivotal point in the progress of philosophy. But what is the nature of Christianity's contribution? Has it affected philosophy radically or only superficially? Has it destroyed the nature of philosophy? Or is philosophy capable of assistance from on high and of still remaining philosophy? These are questions which must be answered.

Mgr. de Solages, in explaining M. Maritain's solution employs the following example:

The difference between philosophizing with or without faith is the difference between climbing the Alps with or without a guide. But, you say, if the guide from time to time draws on the rope to pull you up to the summit, do you pretend that you arrived there by your own powers? If your reasonings are partly dependent on revelation, do you pretend that you are philosophizing? But there is the point—there is no need for the guide to pull on the rope. There are two ways of making an ascent with a guide: one in which the guide pulls you up; the other in which he merely points out the way and you follow without any assistance. When the guide draws on the rope, i. e., when your demonstrations depend on revelation, you are a theologian; but in Christian philosophy the arguments are independent of revelation; the guide never draws on the rope.²

M. Maritain distinguishes between the nature of philosophy and the particular environment it may be in. In itself, philosophy is a science which comprehends within its range everything that can be known by the pure light of reason. It starts with principles which are evident, and deduces conclusions which are evidently contained in its premises. Under this aspect there is no difference between Greek, Moslem, Jewish or Christian philosophy.

However, when a Christian begins to philosophize he has another source of truth than that of his own reason. In other words, philosophy is environed by the vast expanses of the supernatural. What is the result? According to Maritain there are four effects of this approximation of the two orders: 1) the presentation of new truths;

² *La Vie Intellectuelle* XXV (1933) No. 2, pp. 220-221.

- 2) the opportunity for reason to exercise its powers in a new field;
- 3) a rational attitude towards the paradox of a supernatural order;
- 4) subjective strengthening of the mind by the spiritual character of the supernatural. Let us consider these briefly.

First of all, Christianity has presented to the philosophers truths of the natural order, which they had never explicitly recognized. They are the truths catalogued by M. Gilson. They were only obscurely foreshadowed in pagan philosophy. But they were there. Christianity was not something which cut the current of human thought in twain. God, in His revelation, used concepts already known to man. Some of the revealed truths were extensions of the principles of natural reason, as St. Thomas has so clearly shown. Secondly, reason can be aided by speculating on the mysteries of faith. A man can learn much from an aeroplane ride, of which he would never have been conscious had he remained on the ground. A rational attitude towards the mysteries of faith, such as the Trinity and Incarnation, demands a clarification of many philosophical problems. Thirdly, M. Maritain approves the contribution of Gabriel Marcel to this question of a Christian philosophy. As Marcel says,³ the existence of the supernatural, the irrational by superiority is a scandal, a paradox for reason. Christian philosophy accepts this scandal gratefully and without restraint. A non-Christian philosophy would seek to attenuate the scandal, mask the paradox, absorb the revealed datum into a dialectic of pure spirit. In the words of Mgr. de Solages, Christian philosophy would admit that there is a place in a rational conception of the world for the supernatural, the "terra incognita" of the suprarational. These three aids or supplements of reason are called by Maritain objective, i. e., outside, in a sense, of the philosopher.

The fourth contribution of faith to a philosopher is subjective. The acceptance on faith of truths knowable by reason strengthens the subjective rational adherence of the mind to these truths. Finally, the habit of contemplation spiritualizes the whole man and elevates the philosophical habit in its own order.

IV

Père Sertillanges, O.P., pushes the discussion further than any other philosopher, with the exception of Maurice Blondel. His views coincide to a great extent with those of Blondel. There are many

³ *Nouvelle Revue des Jeunes*, 15 mars 1932.

who will not agree with some of his statements. In order to avoid misinterpretation we will quote him constantly.

If the philosopher who adheres to Christianity should attempt to develop his philosophy in complete isolation from the object of faith, and expect thus to construct a philosophy integral and sufficient in its own sphere, this philosophy would be false; for it would exclude from its consideration not only the fact of revelation, but the possibility of revelation, a positive possibility, for it is admitted by St. Thomas . . . that the existence of the supernatural order as well as the possibility of its communication to man by Divine Omnipotence can be demonstrated.

Likewise, this philosopher would avoid studying the fitness of revelation; the appeal . . . of our intellectual and practical aspirations: a superhuman curiosity, a desire, in a word, a profound dynamism which orientates us towards a destiny at once impossible of attainment by our own powers, and yet impossible to irradicate from our vital impulses, though these impulses do not determine the form of our destiny. These are philosophical questions and St. Thomas, the philosopher, has not ignored them.⁴

Père Sertillanges goes on to say that these questions concerning the supernatural and revelation, man's desires and aspirations are usually treated in Apologetics. He deplors this for

it would be a great victory to pursue our philosophers on their own ground and force them to admit this positive, congenital deficiency, a deficiency which results from real privation and which is not a mere absence of some perfection, and bring them to recognize the quasi-presence of the supernatural on all pages of philosophy.⁵

The principal obstacle to the faith among philosophers is the pretention to self-sufficiency.

The autonomy of thought—a claim which in general is just—easily overleaps itself and falls into absolutism; and absolutism is justifiable as long as thought has not been philosophically limited.⁶

A philosophy which would limit the autonomy of thought would be entitled to the name of Christian philosophy.

V

As mentioned before not all will admit these statements of Père Sertillanges. The task he lays on Christian philosophy is twofold: first, in regard to the supernatural; secondly, in regard to man's deficiencies. Let us consider first the role of reason in demonstrating the existence of the supernatural and the possibility of its communication to man; secondly, what we can conclude from the pitiable condition of man deprived of supernatural aid.

⁴ Art. cit. p. 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

It is generally admitted that the existence of the supernatural can be demonstrated. The conclusion of the demonstration does not arrive at a positive notion of the supernatural, but rather at a concept of something exceeding the limits of man's natural knowledge. It takes its beginnings from these same limits and proceeds as follows: Man obtains knowledge only through creatures. No creature nor aggregate of creatures can give an adequate idea of the intimate nature of God. It follows, then, that in God there is an order of truths above the comprehension of man. We insist, however, that the knowledge thus obtained is negative. Hence, Père Sertillanges' second statement does not follow, viz., that we can demonstrate the possibility of a communication of the supernatural to man. For, if we knew that with certainty, we would be demonstrating a truth which is essentially supernatural. If we have no positive knowledge of the supernatural we cannot know whether it can be communicated to man or not.

However reason is not at a total loss in this question. There are some indications which would enable us to take a reasonable attitude toward the supernatural once we had accepted the fact of its communication to us on faith. Man is a creature of God and at first sight it would seem that God could raise man up to the supernatural order by His Omnipotence. The modernists, however, object to this line of reasoning. The same objection was formulated by St. Thomas.

The corporal eye cannot be elevated in such a way as to understand an intellectual substance, because it is above its nature; if, therefore, to see the essence of God is beyond the powers of any created intellect, it would seem that no such intellect could attain to the vision of the divine essence.⁷

The answer lies in the nature of the intellect, which is infinite in its reach, though not in its grasp. The adequate object of the intellect is the far-flung realm of being, and even God is not outside that realm. Moreover, this possibility of a participation in the supernatural follows from man's inward urge to see the essence of God. But it cannot be said that the nature of the intellect or the impulse to see God are sufficient foundations on which to construct a philosophical demonstration.⁸

The second task of a Christian philosophy, according to Père Sertillanges, is to insist on the insufficiency of man. The necessity of this was brought to our attention recently. In Harper's Magazine appeared the following:

⁷ *Summa Theol.*, I, q. 12, a. 4, ad 3.

⁸ Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *De Revelatione*, Vol. 1, pp. 337-403.

The starting point of a positive philosophy, when scepticism has wiped the slate clear of unworthy fictions, is a new kind of faith—the belief that, whatever the ultimate realities of creation, there is truth at least in the assumption that man, denied supernatural aid and avoiding self-deception, still can find happiness on earth through what he can create for himself by his own courage and determination.⁹

This is an example of the self-complacency of modern man in the face of his own weakness. But, granted that a Christian philosopher could convince such a one of his insufficiency, would he immediately recognize the need of the supernatural? In other words, does a philosophy of insufficiency, such as a Christian philosophy must be, necessarily point to the supernatural? Undoubtedly, our helplessness needs help from on high. But does that mean supernatural help? Rather, if man truly needs God's help, then that help must be natural. For, if man needed the supernatural, it would no longer be supernatural. The supernatural is by definition that which exceeds the needs and capacities of man. It is a pure gift of God. Hence, from man's insufficiency we cannot conclude to the supernatural.¹⁰

VI

Père Sertillanges does not stop here. Thus far he has been treating of the tasks incumbent on a philosophy which bears the name Christian. Passing on to a consideration of the role of philosophy in the face of revealed mysteries, he commends the attitude of M. Maritain with regard to the relation between ethics and the faith. M. Maritain is of the opinion that an ethics which does not take into consideration man's supernatural destiny is false. But why confine this to the practical order? asks Pere Sertillanges.

Accepting the dogmas as facts, insofar as they are an experience—are they not the experience of Christ, communicated to His brethren?—by a purely rational method one would speculate on them, taking into account the entire datum, without, however, any confusion with theology as to method, principles or object, and linking philosophy to the totality of wisdom.¹¹

F. Van Steenberghe asks:

What does speculative theology do, if not "accept the revealed dogmas as facts," "take into account the entire datum," "link philosophy to the totality of wisdom?"

But Père Sertillanges insists that it is possible to take a dogma of faith, the Incarnation for example, and treat it from a philosophic as well as a theological point of view. When he proposed this opinion

⁹ F. S. Hopkins, "After Religion, What?" *Harpers*, April, 1934, p. 531.

¹⁰ Poulpique, O.P., *L'Objet Integrale de l'Apologetique*, pp. 437-440.

¹¹ Art. cit. p. 15.

at the meeting of the Société Thomiste, he evoked a lively discussion. This was finally ended by a suggestion of the Abbé Marquart, that he show by a concrete example in one of his future articles how a philosophical and theological discussion of a revealed truth would proceed. Though we are very sceptical of the outcome, we are willing to wait for such an article before presenting any criticism.

Let us conclude with the evaluation of F. Van Steenberghen, who was present at the discussions of the Société Thomiste.¹² He admits that they were very confused and that at first sight very divergent views were voiced. However, he found three fundamental points of agreement. First, Christianity has had a profound influence on the historical development of philosophy. Secondly, a philosophy properly so-called can not formally bear the title Christian. Finally, in the mind of a Christian, the regime to which both faith and reason are to be subjected is not one of separation, nor of simple subordination of reason to faith, but a regime of union and reciprocal relations.

¹² *Revue Néo-Scholastique de Philosophie* XXXV (1933) No. 40, pp. 543-544.