

THE CHRISTIAN AND PHILOSOPHY

The Problem

SOME twenty-five or thirty years ago a controversy flared up over the question of a "Christian philosophy." Since it had historical origins, the debate centered around two main issues: whether there ever was a philosophy that deserved the title "Christian," and whether such a designation is really ever valid. As is evident enough, once more the thorny problem of the relationship between faith and reason was resurrected. Philosophy is commonly known to be reason's pursuit of the knowledge of reality through its causes, while the name "Christian" implies faith in Christ or the Christian revelation. The difficulty shows itself immediately: how can philosophy be called "Christian" without compromising its very nature? Is not the interplay of faith and reason the domain of theology?

The scholar at the center of the historical aspect of the controversy was Etienne Gilson. He maintained that Christianity did *de facto* develop a distinctively Christian philosophy. Anyone in the least familiar with M. Gilson's monumental works on the philosophy of the Middle Ages will realize with what dedication and erudition he defends this thesis. Even today he works zealously for a restoration of this "Christian" philosophy. For his labors Anton C. Pegis has called him the "disciple of Christian philosophy"; the "apostle of Christian philosophy" would not be unmerited.

Just as M. Gilson was and is the historian of Christian philosophy, Jacques Maritain was and is its theoretician. In many books and articles he has analyzed and defended the possibility of a truly Christian philosophy. Indeed, he insists that not only can there be but there must be a Christian philosophy.

Many other eminent scholars have taken sides in this debate. Yet we have explicitly cited only Messrs. Gilson and Maritain for a purpose. Of all the contemporary Thomist philosophers, these

two are probably the most widely read and respected. From the point of view of popularity alone, it would seem that these defenders of Christian philosophy have won the day. But the fact is that this very widespread diffusion of their ideas calls for a reappraisal of the fundamentals of the question. This is what we shall attempt in this article.

However, two things should be noted in the beginning. First of all, the question has many ramifications and side issues too numerous even to mention here. Therefore we shall consider mainly the validity of the term "Christian philosophy." Secondly, it should be borne in mind that this is a theological and not a philosophical problem. This seems odd in light of the fact that the dispute has chiefly concerned philosophers. Yet it pertains to philosophy, or rather that part of philosophy which is natural wisdom or metaphysics to determine only its own nature and the nature of the other rational sciences inferior to it. When a question of the rapport of faith and reason arises, as is this, natural wisdom is not capable of judging such matters. Rather it pertains to a higher wisdom, sacred theology. Theology has the right and duty to judge, order and use all rational sciences since they are inferior to it.¹ In other words, to determine how Christian philosophy can be pertains to that wisdom which has competency both in the area of reason and revelation, the wisdom that is theology.

Towards a Solution

Before attempting to arrive at a balanced judgment, we should first line up some necessary distinctions. First, we know by faith, especially as it was clearly expounded at the Vatican Council, that God in His mercy chose to reveal both truths about Himself of the supernatural order completely beyond the natural capacities of man, such as the mystery of the Trinity, and also truths of the natural order which can be attained by reason alone, as the fact of divine Providence. Obviously we are not concerned here with revealed supernatural truths because with these philosophy as such has no competency at all. However, in the realm of revealed natural truths the domains of faith and reason overlap. In short, there is an area of truth which can be the object of faith or the object of philosophical speculation.

Also, we might make use of a distinction proposed by M. Maritain between philosophy according to its nature and philosophy according to its state or condition of existence.² Philosophy according to its nature would be an abstract consideration of phi-

losophy as such. So taken, there is no problem of a philosophy that is Christian or not for philosophy essentially and as pure philosophy is solely a work of human reason; it includes nothing of divine faith or revelation in its essence. But philosophy does not grow up in a pure and abstract state. It is realized in certain conditions of existence, in this or that milieu. In this latter sense we can quite validly speak of philosophy in a Christian or pre-Christian setting, much as we speak of medieval and Greek philosophy. Now our quest focuses on this: should philosophy in a Christian setting be so influenced by the natural truths obtained from revelation as to be validly called Christian philosophy?

To deny any and all influence of revelation on philosophy would be an extreme and somewhat impossible position. It would amount to an overstatement of the autonomy of philosophy and a confession of blindness to historical reality. Neither does it seem doctrinally sound in the light of Pius IX's condemnation of the proposition that "philosophy is to be treated without any regard to supernatural revelation."³ Yet to submit philosophy to an unlimited influence would destroy the very nature of philosophy. The same Pope defended the autonomy and independence of philosophy with regard to these revealed truths in a letter to the Archbishop of Munich, *Gravissimas inter*, in 1862:

Moreover, philosophy's task is to ascertain the object of rational knowledge and many truths, to understand them well and to look to their progress. By means of arguments sought from reason's own principles, philosophy should demonstrate, vindicate, and defend a large number of these truths which faith also proposes for belief; such as the existence of God, His nature, and His attributes.⁴

The important phrase to note is "by means of arguments sought from reason's own principles." Thus philosophy, even in its concrete realization in a Christian setting, can and must proceed according to its proper method and principles. No influence can be such that philosophy is forced to abandon these, for in so doing it would cease to exist. Now we can ask about the possible extent of Christian influence, safeguarding at the same time the very existence of philosophy.

St. Thomas, in considering the fittingness of the revelation of truths of the natural order, states that without such a revelation these truths would be attained unaided only by a certain few, after a long time, and with much error involved.⁵ History is witness to the veracity of this. Especially in order to avoid error, faith in these truths should serve at least as a negative guide for the philosopher. Should there arise any conflict between what an

all-knowing God has revealed and fallible human reason has attained, the cause evidently is faulty reasoning which is false philosophy. To deny faith such a negative influence on philosophy would be absurdly unrealistic.

But what of any positive influence? Can the revealed natural truths be received into philosophy as objective data? If philosophy incorporated such data into its development solely because it was revealed by God, it would be acting contrary to its own principles and method and thus not be philosophy at all. A truth can be the object of faith or the object of science. But it cannot be both at the same time for the same person. We cannot at the same time believe and know a thing scientifically. Faith, as is stated in the Epistle to the Hebrews, is "the evidence of things that are not seen." Because a thing is "not seen" we can assent to it on someone's authority, or to use a common expression, "take someone's word for it." Once this is *seen*, once we prove its existence, faith ceases with regard to it for the truth has become evident in itself and recourse to authority is no longer the motive of our assent. So, to assent to a truth on divine authority is quite simply an act of divine faith; to "philosophize" about a truth so accepted is really to theologize.

Yet there is no valid objection against such truths being positive, objective guides for philosophy. Let us exemplify what we mean. In his consideration of the knowledge of God in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle reasons that the object of divine thought must be God Himself, that "it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks" (XII, 9, 1074b 34). But he hesitates to say that God knows things other than himself. "Are there not some things about which it is incredible that it (the divine thought) should think?" (1074b 25) For a Christian, it is manifest in Scripture that God knows all things. "And there is no creature hidden from his sight; but all things are naked and open to the eyes of him to whom we have to give an account" (Heb. 4:13). So, in following Aristotle's development of metaphysics, we should have to deny the incredibility of God's knowing some things other than himself and search out the fallacy behind such a statement—here, the negative influence of faith. Then we might consider philosophically the omniscience of God by showing how God in knowing himself must know all other things, depending for our proof on the principles set out by Aristotle—here, the positive influence of faith. Faith in this truth can and did serve as a positive guide for the assimilation of it into Aristotelian metaphysics in a rationally demonstra-

tive way. But this truth and all such revealed natural truths, once assimilated, are no longer objects of faith but philosophical truths known as conclusions of rational proofs.

Also, it is important to note that this negative and positive influence upon philosophy is an extrinsic influence. In other words, the truths precisely as revealed, or as objects of faith, remain outside the pale of philosophical progress. They enter properly into philosophy only when established according to the order and method proper to philosophy; then they cease to be objects of faith. Thus it should be evident that these truths, precisely as revealed or as objects of faith, cannot properly exert an intrinsic influence on philosophy itself if the latter is to remain philosophy.

Now what of the term "Christian philosophy"? We must admit that all that has been said so far of the legitimate impact of faith upon philosophy is rather the influence of faith upon the philosopher. Christianity could leave no mark upon the philosophy, or rather the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle simply because they were not Christians and lived in pre-Christian times. There is a Christian influence in the scholastic development of Plato and Aristotle precisely because the scholastics were believers. Thus they could correct and perfect Greek philosophy. Also, faith exercises a negative influence on philosophers rather than on philosophy since any error in reasoning to be corrected by faith cannot be ascribed to philosophy but to the philosopher. The revealed natural truths are a positive guide for the philosopher and not philosophy since it is not because of the deficiency of philosophy to arrive at these truths that they were fittingly revealed, but rather because of the "weakness of our intellect in judging."⁸

In short, the distinction between philosophy according to its nature and philosophy according to its state or conditions of existence should rather be a distinction between philosophy and philosopher. The uniting of philosophy and Christianity in the concrete is the union of the Christian and the philosopher. As such it is an accidental union. There are Christian mathematicians but they are not Christian because they are mathematicians. Nor are they mathematicians because they are Christians. The same is also true of Christian philosophers. Yet it is possible, all things being equal, to be better philosophers because we are Christians since a Christian should have all the advantages of a life of grace and virtue, no small aid in philosophizing. By the same token, we should also be better mathematicians and anything else that re-

quires intense effort and dedication. However, in the last analysis, it is more precise, and thus more philosophical, to speak of philosophy and Christian philosophers rather than Christian philosophy.

Summary and Review

It is an undeniable fact that Christianity influenced greatly the historical evolution of philosophy, but this influence was extrinsic to philosophy itself and thus indirect. Because of the revelation of certain natural truths, it was possible for the Christian thinkers to correct false philosophical notions handed down to them and also to expand the philosophy of their antecedents by working certain revealed natural truths into the philosophical synthesis according to philosophy's own method and principles. Christianity also made better men, and thus better thinkers, of philosophers. Yet, great as this influence was and is, it does not so affect the philosopher that he elaborates a Christian philosophy in any formal sense. Rather, it helps his philosophy to be true. Because of all the necessary distinctions and reservations involved, it is far more precise and exact to speak of Christian philosophers; Christian philosophy is a deceptive term that is open to much misunderstanding.

In this context, it would be more than rash for us to contest the veracity of M. Gilson's historical studies. He is undoubtedly a great scholar and his works are deservedly well-respected. However, we might question his interpretation of the facts. In short, we might question his definition of Christian philosophy. In *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* he tells us, "Thus I call Christian every philosophy which although keeping the two orders (natural and supernatural) formally distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation as an indispensable auxiliary to reason" (p. 37). Such a definition has manifest theological overtones. Philosophy has no capacity for even considering the supernatural order let alone distinguishing it from the natural order. Again it is not equipped to deal with Christian revelation as such; hence it is unable to analyze it and see it as an indispensable auxiliary to reason. Nor is this criticism a minimizing of philosophy. It is a safeguarding of a very valid and necessary system of thought. M. Gilson will quote St. Paul, *non erubescio evangelium*, as he advises a restoration of the "several scholastic philosophies to their natural places—namely, their natal theologies. . . ." At this point the Christian philosopher might also quote St. Paul. "For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen

—his everlasting power also and divinity—being understood through the things that are made” (Rom. 1:20). No Christian should be “ashamed of the gospel”; neither should he scorn the God-given gift of reason.

—Justin M. Cunningham, O.P.

FOOTNOTES

¹ cf. *In I Sent.*, q. I, Prolog. a. I; *Summa Theol.*, I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2; *In Boet. De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 7.

² cf. *Science and Wisdom*, p. 79.

³ Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 1714: *Philosophia tractanda est nulla supernaturalis revelationis habita ratione.*

⁴ *The Church Teaches* No. 46.

⁵ cf. *Summa Contra Gentes*, I, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*