

Why Should Christians Study Philosophy?*

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TO THE SURPRISE of many, and the dismay of some, scholastic philosophy is making a comeback in the Catholic Church. In March of 2011 the Vatican declared that the philosophical formation of every seminarian studying for the priesthood should be intensified, with two complete years of (mostly) Thomistic philosophy, prior to the four years of theological study that is required for ordination. Emphasis, it said, is to be placed in particular on classical metaphysics. So clerics in the diverse settings of Kinshasa, Singapore, and Cleveland are required to undertake a common formation in the study of being, as well as classical logic and ethics. But what is at stake in this renewed insistence that Christians ought to study philosophy? Prior to the Second Vatican Council there was the common presumption in Catholic academic culture of a “perennial philosophy”: a tradition of classical wisdom originating in Plato and Aristotle, subject to healthy Christian influences in the age of the Fathers of the Church, culminating in the scholastic period (with figures such as Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Scotus in particular). Modern thinkers were to be encountered only in the light of a logically prior engagement with this tradition. Heidegger was brought into dialogue with Aquinas. Hume was deciphered in comparison with Aristotle. So is the Vatican now, under the auspices of a “hermeneutic of continuity,” in fact submitting us to a nostalgia for olden times, analogous to the lust for Gregorian chant? . . . the desire for something with its own indisputable beauty, but which is also the irretrievable treasure of a historically bygone age? So some people say.

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Of course there is a robust tradition of criticism regarding the Christian embrace of philosophy. To cite a respectable example: in the twelfth century St. Bernard criticized Abelard as a logic-chopping rationalist, whose writings were symptomatic of the anti-contemplative stance of university theology. The true theologian, he underscored, is a monastic contemplative. Luther had harsh things to say about Aristotle, and the scholastics who appealed to him. The true Christian believes in the God of the cross, not the metaphysical proofs of the unmoved mover. But whatever the examples we might like to choose as historically emblematic for ourselves, the age we live in has its own challenges that are not reducible to the dramas of the past. There can be little question that claims to promote a universal philosophy of enduring historical import face severe challenges in our current cultural setting. So perhaps that is the point we need to examine. Let us consider the chief objections to the Vatican's new (old) curriculum, and see where they lead.

I

Take for instance the typical post-conciliar intellectual motif that has been reiterated incessantly for the last fifty years. We no longer live in the age of grand metaphysical schemes. Whatever the glories of Thomism, the claim to a universal philosophical patrimony on the part of Catholics prior to the council was latently saturated with a mind-numbing naiveté. This was the error of thinking one's self in possession of a comprehensive form of thought which was applicable to all, but which was in fact simply excessively abstract and ahistorical. Precisely one of the key insights of modernity is that we are subjects always, already emerged in the thickets of concrete history. Our thought, our philosophy, even our very beings are historically conditioned, such that we are meshed with other persons relationally in culturally situated contexts outside of which we become unintelligible. Consequently, there is not a way to "freeze" the process of thought around a set of ahistorical essences or ideas that endure through all of time, themselves taking on a necessity for every age. Rather, following Karl Rahner's intuitions, modern Christianity needs to move in the inverse direction: to adopt most fundamentally a *narrative* vision of reality. Experience and phenomenological description, not intellectual systems, should be accorded primacy of place. Correspondingly, if we want to find God, we need to experience him in history, not try to escape from history in a flight toward abstract universalism. The historical God has wed our fragile human condition, bound himself to us within time and place, and so it is there we can look for him. This way of thinking leads out into the contextual theologies of our time: libera-

tion and feminist theologies, dialogue with the world religions, and various forms of pragmatic evangelical theology that focus on the ethical and psychological concerns of our contemporaries.

A very different form of objection comes from the most intense form of modern secularism that continuously confronts the modern Christian: that of scientism. I mean by this term the view that the only real knowledge worth having is that procured through the empirical studies of the modern physical sciences. A Christian version of the objection goes like this: The hard-core empirical scientist who is anti-religious looks on theology as a kind of delusional mythology that is outdated in thought. So some Christians want to engage him or her on the basis of a philosophical vision of reality that hopes to open the empiricist mind to greater expanses of being even on a “natural” or philosophical level. Well and good. But the empiricist also thinks that the classical philosophy being peddled is nearly as useless a folk medicine as the theologian’s potions. That is to say, it is an only slightly less dangerous form of delusion. When thought gets serious, it gets scientific. Now given that this is the prevalent world-view of many of our secular contemporaries, why should we work very industriously to articulate a vision of reality that is *infra-Christian* (that is, merely philosophical), when in fact what we are peddling from the beginning is just a doomed apologetics? We should simply articulate our core Christian beliefs lucidly, try to live an integral Christian witness, and believe in the power of the Resurrection and the grace of God to convert even the most hardened hearts. St. Paul would counsel us to do nothing less; to seek to do more is in fact implicitly to evade the formal imperatives of the gospel.

Last but not least common, there is the post-modern objection. This is the one that is the most friendly but also the most deadly. It is also the viewpoint most prevalent among the professional theologians. Simply stated it runs thus: talk of a perennial philosophy—of an analysis of reality that is of enduring and universally applicable import—is intrinsically attractive. Would that such a thing were possible. But in the end this is fool’s gold. No one human articulation of meaning is necessarily binding on the human intellect. Man is not only a factory of idols, but also an endless forger of intellectual systems, and the metaphysics he formulates are pluralistic, and mutually exclusive in their incompatibility. Tertullian asked “what has Athens to do with Jerusalem,” but we can also ask, what has “Athens to do with Königsberg, or the Sorbonne to do with Cambridge.” Philosophies endlessly and inevitably refute philosophies, and there is no common ground from which to adjudicate what is true philosophically from a supposedly grounded first perspective. In fact, people inevitably disagree

even on the first principles of rational thought. This is not disturbing, however, once we realize that all of it comes under the sign of the fallen intellect. Because the native terrain of human thought is constantly shifting and unstable, our innate aspiration toward universal knowledge can be redeemed only “from above,” that is to say, from recourse to divine revelation. It is the theological truth of the gospel alone (explicated through Christian doctrine) that provides a universal and enduring intellectual science of reality. Everything else is just a false substitute.

II

Whatever the power of these objections, they run contrary to the long-standing teaching of the Catholic Church. Already in 1563, the 23rd session of the Council of Trent underscored the necessity of distinct formation in philosophy for every candidate to the Catholic priesthood, and this emphasis on philosophy (scholasticism in particular) was taken up in more recent times by the First Vatican Council, Leo XIII’s famous encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, the statements on priestly formation at Vatican II, and John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio*. John Henry Newman famously argued that when an idea is essential to the Christian religion we see it continually reasserted through time in the doctrinal life of the Church, as it undergoes development of expression in consistent ways. By these standards, it pertains to the essence of modern Catholicism to insist on the importance of scholastic philosophical studies, as an integral part of Christian identity. Scandalous as it may seem to some, this is itself an enduring stance of the Church in the heart of the contemporary world. Why is this?

To answer that question, we could do worse than to have recourse to the teaching of Aquinas. After all, if there is a wisdom that is perennial, its past expositors should be able to speak to our current concerns, and thereby prove the relevance of their ideas. In his *Commentary on Boethius’ De Trinitate* (q. 2, a. 3), St. Thomas gives three reasons that philosophy is essential to the study of sacred theology. Let us consider these in turn.

The first reason concerns the so-called *praeambula fidei*, or “preambles of faith.” Christian culture has need of philosophy to articulate truths of reason that “overlap” with truths of revelation, so that the compatibility and harmony of biblical revelation and natural reason can be shown. Some pertinent examples would include the rational acknowledgment of the spiritual soul as a principle of personal identity, which makes human animals radically different from the other animals, despite their shared ancestry. Or the arguments regarding the existence and nature of God, which also entail apophatic arguments concerning what God is not (as a

corrective to our caricatures of the divine). Or fundamental truths of human morality touching on issues like human equality, and the dignity of human life from conception to natural death . . . truths of reason which suggest that our mainstream media culture is not as “rational” as it takes itself to be. These are all domains where natural intelligence certainly cannot demonstrate the truth of Christianity, but it can show—from rational starting points alone—our inherent openness to core biblical truths of faith. Philosophy can thus defend the well-founded character of our core religious aspirations.

What is being advocated here by Aquinas is not that philosophy should be instrumentalized by Christians as merely an apologetical tool, one that prepares the mind for conversion to theology. Even less is it the idea that philosophy should play the role of a substitute for the grace of faith (a kind of epistemological Pelagianism that passes the work of salvation off onto human reason). The issue, rather, has to do with the integration of faith and reason within a culture of the intellectual life that is simultaneously fully respectful of the native powers of human intelligence and of the demands of grace. A culture of philosophical wisdom and argument within Christianity allows for a robust Christian intellectual life, one in which the Christian qua philosopher can see where human reason leaves off and revealed mystery begins, but also where revealed mystery presupposes and assumes the truths of natural reason. Despite the mockery and jealousy of the pagans, it is true: if rightly understood, the alliance between philosophical realism and supernatural faith is both delightful in its harmony and unbreakable in its inner force.

Second, then, the philosophical culture of faithful reason allows Christians to challenge the secularist mentality to acquire a more honest rational openness to religious claims. A culture that can no longer see a *rational* place for discourse about God, the soul, and objective morality is a culture inherently closed to Christianity, *even* in the face of divine revelation. But it is also an irrational culture. In this sense, philosophy comes to the aid of theology simply in that it is concerned with the inherent “vocation” of human culture to seek wisdom, or ultimate perspective, in light of the true ultimate causes of reality.

Aristotle claims at the start of the *Metaphysics* that human beings desire by nature to know, and to know ultimately of the first causes of everything. From this point of view, then, realism in the end means coming to terms with what is first not in our consciousness but in the order of reality, whether that be matter, the demiurge, pure chance, a world-soul, or the transcendent God. Our contemporary university system excels in communicating expertise to its students on a range of disparate subjects,

from modern political economy to the poetics of Chaucer, and from micro-biology to the study of Confucius. But there is a corresponding impoverishment when it comes to the integration of these diverse forms of knowledge into a "vision of the whole." This is a well-trod observation, as we know, for the post-modernist dilemma begins precisely from the admission of despair of ever finding such a unity. Whereas philosophy really should enter in as the arbiter of human reason's search for the unity of the sciences and for ultimate perspective, we often see instead simply an indifferent resignation in the face of the deeper questions, or perhaps the arbitrary ideological assertion of false absolutes (often secular ones) through recourse to un-argued intuition.

A real response to this dilemma cannot come about solely through the promotion of theological doctrine. It also requires a philosophical renewal of the capacity of the human person for metaphysical realism. In the face of realistic philosophical arguments, the ills of post-modernist perspectivalism, the lassitude of indifferentism, and the smugness of anti-supernaturalism can all be seen themselves to be forms of unrealistic thinking: the indulgences of minds that have failed to acknowledge the noble vocation of the human intelligence relentlessly to seek the truth.

Last, however, Aquinas underscores that philosophy is essential to theology for its health *as theology*. Christian thought is not an exercise in mere moral posturing, or an unstructured spirituality soup. It is serious thought about reality. It is also, however, thought conducted in a human mode: by discursive reasoning seeking explanations and insights into God based upon the things God does in the world, things that are both natural and supernatural.

This is why Aquinas will say that argumentation and demonstration are intellectual activities that are proper to a theologically informed faith, even when that faith takes its starting points from revealed premises. We don't know, for instance, "in advance" by mere natural reason that Jesus Christ is God or that God is triune. To accede to such mysteries, which are veiled from the powers of unaided human reason, divine revelation is necessary, a revelation given gratuitously by God to the Church in faith. But we can reason *in light of* this revelation that *if* Christ is truly God and man, then he must possess in himself all that is truly human, such as the capacity to learn intellectually, or a human body capable of suffering. Likewise, he must possess as well all that is properly divine, such as the power to raise the dead. Theology assimilates philosophical methods and claims to consider *theologically*, then, what it means to speak of the vulnerability of Christ crucified as man, or of his saving power as God, and how the two are present simultaneously in one person: the saving power of the crucified Lord.

Likewise, philosophical reflection helps us to identify concepts that can be used to express the inner mystery of the life of God itself. Augustine in his *De Trinitate* saw in effect that he could employ insights into human personhood and the soul from the Greek philosophical tradition in order to speak analogously of the personal life of the Trinity. Aquinas notes that such reflections are based upon the solid indications of Scripture, but through recourse to philosophical methods of reflection they simultaneously seek to clarify what the Scriptures indicate. What does it mean to say, for instance, that there is in God an eternal procession of wisdom that we designate as a person under the proper name of the “Word” or *Logos* (Jn 1:1–3)? How is the Holy Spirit to be thought of as an eternal procession of spirated love? In undertaking such reflections, theology assimilates the classical philosophical aspiration for knowledge of God. However, it also transcends it, embracing a knowledge beyond the range of unaided natural reason: that of the inner life of God itself, communicated to us already imperfectly in faith, and reflected upon in view of the union that is promised in the vision of God.

Of course such an antiquated image of theological reason might be a source of alienation or even terror to the insular liberal secularism of our time, with its skeptical and antiseptic rationality. But whatever the conventional certitudes of our contemporaries, the mind by its very structure has an innate desire to transcend boundaries, and so it has the capacity and inclination to dirty itself by marrying with revealed religion. Christianity of course understands such “dirt” as a cleansing and healing light, one that elevates the mind into sacred conversation and friendship with God.

III

To consider our objections: what should we say about the claim that the return to scholastic, or classically inspired, philosophy is a flight toward the irrelevancy of ahistorical abstraction? In one sense this is an ironic objection, since scholasticism is a tradition-based form of inquiry, a historical form of learning that “safeguards” reference to classical sources and renews them cyclically within new contexts by way of new applications. This in contrast to many forms of Enlightenment or contemporary Anglo-American philosophy that would seek to promulgate ahistorically an intuitive appeal to universality, absent the encounter with historical tradition. But we can also make some caveats: the turn toward historical *ressourcement* in modern theology conducted by Daniélou and de Lubac procured valuable resources for theological reflection, over and against *some* of the less than reasonable objections of their scholastic interlocutors. The modern theological recovery of emphasis on experience and

historical consciousness has potential points of contact with the classical insistence on the role of mystical experience, spiritual affectivity, and the contemplative life as a necessary context for theological reflection.

This being said, however, the naiveté of the post-conciliar critics of scholasticism is to think that an ecclesial tradition can live by historical erudition alone (or by embracing the philosophical toolkit of the particular moment), without ontological study of the enduring natures and structures of reality. Of course Christian intellectuals need to be concerned about widening the conversation with their interlocutors—both historically and culturally—as a necessary safeguard against intellectual provincialism. But this obsession of our age for experiential novelty is intellectually fertile only if it leads back to a deeper synthetic consideration of the very nature of reality. In fact, to take different viewpoints and attempt to find the truth implicit within them just is the methodology advocated classically within scholastic spheres. Such an aspiration presupposes, however, that we can build up conclusions around some solid idea of what natures are, what human persons are, what the soul is, what we can know (or not know) of God, and so forth. So, principled knowledge is just as essential as the process of conversation, and conceptual understanding is just as crucial as experience of our time and epoch.

This issue becomes more acute when we consider the question of God. For if God has come to exist among us as a subject of history, nevertheless, the transcendent author of creation is not himself a history, nor a prisoner of our immediate experience. Kant wanted to underscore precisely the limits of the mind to think at all about the transcendence of God. For him, human understanding cannot consider “causalities” that extend beyond the spacio-temporal realm. This influential idea, however, dooms human thought to the sphere of pure intra-historical immanence. Classical Christianity provides diverse *philosophical* resources for thinking constructively about the absolute transcendence of God: in Dionysius and Damascene, Bonaventure and Aquinas, the Lutheran and Reformed scholastics, and possibly even—ironically—in the implicitly metaphysical thinking of Karl Barth. But a theology that can no longer think *philosophically* about the transcendence of God is simply no study of God at all. It is perhaps a description of man’s experience of the encounter with God in time, but ultimately it receives its intellectual determinations from the study of man, and it reinterprets the divine anthropocentrically. To be about God, and to be theocentric in orientation, Christian theology has need of a classical philosophical realism.

This response ties into the question raised by the second objection. How ought Christian thought to situate itself vis-à-vis the culture of

reductionist scientific empiricism? The issue here is not what we should say to a few angry atheist scientists who are jealous of the intellectual prerogatives of metaphysics and who would seek to “ape” theology in a scientific mode. As long as there are paid book contracts and Manhattan cocktail parties, there will be people of such ilk. We might profit from worrying more about the future of a scientifically literate Christianity—one which rightfully makes complete peace with modern cosmology and the abiding truth of evolutionary theory. This, however, is not the focus of our concern here. The main issue is that classical philosophy (particularly the hylomorphism of Aristotle and Aquinas) permits us to hold together a plenary realism regarding the physical world of the human body and the cosmos with an objective study of the irreducible spiritual life of the human person. This spiritual life is exemplified particularly in the manifold works of human reason, which strives for the truth, and in the life of human free will, which strives for happiness through love. Philosophy here provides a needed intellectual salve in our culture, which is so often divided between a scientism that has difficulty acknowledging the specifically human spiritual life and a post-modern relativism that acknowledges freedom of thought and self-determination, to the denigration of scientific objectivity. There is one human person that is the subject of our biology, mathematical science, poetry of love, ethics, metaphysics of the soul, study of political life, and so on. Man is complex as a being and so requires a complexity of sciences and arts to be rightly understood. Scholastic philosophy, rightly conceived, helps us see the underlying unity amidst this complexity and so assures a larger form of balanced humanism, one that makes room for all the sciences of man, within a larger conversation of concord and mutual enrichment.

Lastly, to consider the post-modern concern. Do we lack foundations or starting points that are necessarily binding, by which natural reason might convey a universally compelling vision of the tasks of human thought? Is all authentic universality implicitly theological?

Let us concede first of all that in speaking of perennial philosophy as it was developed in the Christian tradition, we are not seeking after a “theologically indifferent” form of thought. After all, scholastic philosophy developed in and through a tradition of theological rumination, one which was subject to profound influences stemming from the grace of faith. And perhaps in our frail and fallen state, weakened reason is healed only under the stimulating and strengthening effects of such grace. If this is the case, however, it does not follow that there is no such thing as essentially necessary rational arguments, but only that more is at work in the openness to a philosophical argument than the workings of a mere

neutral rationality. Consequently, universal truth cannot be determined by consulting democratic majorities. The truth of the claim that each human being has a spiritual soul, for instance, does not depend *uniquely* upon whether or not a cogent argument is presented, even *if* the learner has received sufficient intellectual preparation to understand such an argument. It also depends upon a complex existential and religious context: for I am more likely to consider arguments that I have a soul if I am seeing simultaneously in the faith that the spiritual person who I am needs his soul to be saved. The opposite is true as well, however: even if I believe by faith in the reality of the soul, if I cannot see the rationality of the belief, the faith remains inherently unstable in my person, something extrinsic to reason, and potentially painful to embrace.

Philosophical arguments, then, are part and parcel of an integral natural search for understanding, and without them, a culture of Christian rationality becomes inherently undermined and unstable. Whatever its intentions, a post-modern theology that would like to forego appeal to distinctly philosophical formation will inevitably doom itself not only to cultural irrelevance but even to internal incoherence. For without recourse to the explicit practice of philosophical study in its own right, Christians are unable to receive from the tradition they espouse its own classical practices of thought. Ignorance of philosophy sterilizes, then, the intellectual reception of the Christian tradition. Moreover, by failing to sufficiently awaken and maintain in our human culture the native capacity for metaphysical reflection about God, the post-modernist project becomes inadvertently but inevitably a further source of the secularization of the human intellect and of human civilization. It thus reproduces the very problem it seeks to contradict.

IV

It is common knowledge that we are at the end of a decades' long struggle in the Catholic Church that arose in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, a struggle to define the identity of the Catholic faith in a modern context. For the most part, the conservative or classical understanding of the faith has won out, particularly under the mantle of the last two pontificates. Meanwhile, however, the world of western Europe and to some extent North America, continues to secularize dramatically. The recovery of the scholastic heritage of the Church today should not signal a renewal of ideological posturing in the decades' old warfare of left and right, but should strive to address the true challenge of our age: the effective communication of the one Christian faith in the face of the questions and problems of our contemporaries. We should look forward

to the task with hope. It has been done before, and we can do it again, with the help of God. Toward this end, the scholastic patrimony of the Church offers us a powerful resource. It has been tested by the fires of time, and its wisdom endures through the ages: If we engage with it intelligently, it will cast intense light even into the very heart of our contemporary world.

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