What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?: Philosophy and Theology in Scholastic Thought

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Any student of philosophy who has been educated in the classical tradition must come, sooner or later, to face a difficult and inescapable problem concerning the status of philosophy in the 13th century, also known as the Scholastic period. And even more, the student has to contend with the problem whether an authentic form of philosophizing is even possible in a worldview dominated by dogmas and doctrines leaving no room for further inquiry and in-depth analysis. It is thus the objective of this paper to analyze the dramatic formation of philosophical analysis during the Age of Faith providing the reader a deeper appreciation of the phenomenon known as "Christian Philosophy". Furthermore, it is also the objective of this paper to offer the modern reader a different perspective in viewing, and eventually appreciate, Scholastic philosophy. To be able to address these concerns, I have divided this paper into two parts namely: Philosophy in the World of Theology and the Scholastic Synthesis in the Modern World.

PHILOSOPHY IN THE WORLD OF THEOLOGY

What is the status of philosophy in the Scholastic period? In the 20th century Etienne Gilson, a notable scholar of medieval philosophy, published the text of his Gifford Lectures under the title "The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy". These lectures aimed to show not only how much medieval theologians transformed Greek philosophical ideas, and what different doctrinal roads they followed in this transformation, but also and especially how much the work of transforming Greek philosophy owed to the inspiration and the impulse of Christian revelation.[1] If the historians of medieval philosophy, therefore, had step by step proved us that a common scholastic synthesis never existed in the

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[1] Cf. Etienne Gilson, The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy. Translated by A.H.C. Downes. (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1934), p. 18-45.

medieval ages, Etienne Gilson who played a leading part in the story, has played an even more unique role in the establishment of another notion, namely, that of "Christian Philosophy".

Though it may be true that medieval theologians did not create or share in a common philosophical synthesis, it is also true that they felt the influence of a common religious teaching or inspiration. The teaching of Christian revelation impelled their minds, amid otherwise great differences, to think their way toward a God whose name is HE WHO IS; to express in a rational way the fact that this God was a creator and a provider, free and omnipotent in His immediate government of the universe; to find an adequate formula for the notion of man as a unitary substance composed of an intellectual soul and an organic body; and to give an account of the long and laborious effort of mankind to establish a human society on earth as part of its journey to the heavenly Jerusalem. This religious teaching among medieval theologians was not a common body of doctrines but a common spiritual ferment; it was faith working within the human mind, urging it both to believe and to express, in the language of Aristotle or Plato, the intellectual shape and character of the Christian world in all its creaturehood, from its origins to its destiny in God. No, there is not a common philosophy in the medieval ages, but there was a common religious and theological effort to teach Christian doctrine through the instrumentality of philosophical notions taken from the ancient philosophers of Greece. That is why, though Gilson has been more responsible than any other historian for undoing the thesis of a common scholastic philosophical synthesis, he has been also distinctively responsible for recognizing the reality of what he has called "Christian Philosophy".[2] He defined it saying:

> *I call every philosophy which, although keeping the two orders formally distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation as an indispensable auxiliary to reason ... The concept does not correspond to any simple essence susceptible of abstract definition; but corresponds much rather to a concrete historical reality as something calling for description ... It includes in its extension all those philosophical systems which were in fact what they were because a Christian religion existed and because they were ready to submit to its influence.*[3]

[2]Cf. Ibid., p. 45-61.
[3]Ibid., p. 37.

From the definition of Gilson, I wish to point out the paradoxical aspects of "Christian philosophy". It remains true that the schoolmen did not learn philosophy from Aristotle in order to become philosophers, not even Christian philosophers. They learned philosophy in order to use it as the appropriate rational tool in the formation of Christian theology. Those who have objected to the view that philosophies of medieval thinkers were Christian philosophies must now contend with the even more difficult view that these philosophies were created by theologians within theology and for the purposes of theology. In short they were created as parts of theology itself. Now we must ask ourselves what took place in the thirteenth century when the Latinized writings of Aristotle were circulating in the newly established University of Paris. According to Gilson what then took place was that Greek philosophy was received into the Christian world, subjected to a period of examination and correction, and then assimilated within Christian thought and culture. From such a point of view, the main work of the thirteenth century consisted in Christianizing Greek philosophy and especially the philosophy of Aristotle.[4]

But what if Gilson's interpretation is not correct? Let us suppose that though the reception of Aristotle was an undeniably crucial problem in the thirteenth century, it was not the most important or the most critical situation created by the arrival of Aristotle's Latinized texts. Supposing, forgive me if I am pushing this idea forward, that in the presence of Aristotelianism the primary intellectual task of St. Thomas Aquinas as a thirteenth century theologian was the construction of a theology suited to the work of meeting the challenges posited by Aristotelianism, so that the assimilation of the Greek Aristotle and his intellectual world was no more that the external moment of a much deeper internal change within Christian thought itself. Such a view was held not only by Anton Pegis[5], but also by other notable historians of medieval thought such as de Wulf[6] and Thonnard[7]. From such a

[4]Cf. Ibid., p. 113-121.

[5]Cf. Anton Pegis, ed. "What is Christian Philosophy?" in A Gilson Reader. (Garden City: Hanover House, 1957), p. 177-191.

[6]Cf. Maurice de Wulf, Mediaeval Philosophy Illustrated from the System of Thomas Aquinas. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), p. 12-21.

[7]Cf. Jean-Francois Thonnard, A History of Medieval Philosophy. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 5-9.

point of view, the chief task of the thirteenth century was nothing less than the creation of a Christian intellectualism, that is to say, the creation of an intellectual expression of Christian teaching that was religious in its roots and intellectual in its form and structure.

For how could it be Christian without being rooted in revelation? And how could it be intellectual without using the very language of reason that had entered the Christian world in the writings of Aristotle or Plato? How, indeed, could Christianity have an authentic encounter with Aristotelian or Platonic philosophy unless the encounter involved a true intellectual confrontation between the world of belief and the world of philosophy? This was possible only on one condition, namely, if between revelation and philosophy, between the Christian message and the message of Aristotle and Plato, a new and daring intellectual edifice was built by Christians themselves – the message of revelation in the form of a philosophy, expressing itself in the Aristotelian language of Being or the Platonic notion of Being. And this is what the thirteenth century accomplished. Between revelation and philosophy it created a new Christian reality, a metaphysically-ordered theology, a theology that installed the thinking of Aristotle and Plato within faith and built a bridge from revelation to reason.

It is in this regard that Anton Pegis suggests that the main accomplishment of the thirteenth century was the establishment of what may be called the "Christianity of the universities" as distinguished from the "Christianity of the monasteries." According to Pegis, the transition from the Christianity of the monasteries to the Christianity of the universities, or, to say it differently, from the religious world of the Cistercian and Victorine monks to the intellectual university world of St. Bonaventure, St. Albert the Great, and St. Thomas Aquinas, involved a revolutionary internal transformation of Christian thought itself.[8] If, with the twelfth century sons of St. Benedict, the Christian world had been a cloister of devout contemplation, seeking not knowledge but spiritual love, not growth in rationality but an increase in devotion, not the synoptic vision of all Being but the more elevated praise and enjoyment of God, in the thirteenth century Christianity became a doctrine to teach in the language and with the method Aristotle. The twelfth century monks had been humble pilgrims building

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[8]Pegis, op. cit., p. 196-197

spiritual arks or waiting for the gift of divine contemplation. By contrast, St. Bonaventure, at least for a time, and St Thomas Aquinas were university professors, giving to Christian truths a human and rational expression and therefore formulating a theology that spoke for the Christian revelation in a way that was fully grounded in metaphysics and the procedures of human rationality.

The 13th century was the age in which man came alive within Christianity in the constitution and the voice of his intellectual nature. He learned to speak with the science of his intellect within the mystery of his religious faith. The result was the establishment of a new intellectual Christianity, as well as a new Christian intelligence, anchored in revelation for its truth and in philosophical understanding for its expression and its techniques. The men who created such a Christianity were theologians, their work was theology, and the books in which they gave expression to this Christianity and this theology were a new form of Christian literature, namely, the theological Summae. These theologians were the true scholastics and their work was scholasticism, that is to say, Christian teaching speaking in the language of metaphysics. As theologians, the scholastics were distinguished by the use of philosophy, namely, though not exclusively, Aristotelian philosophy, as their chief intellectual tool, by the observance of philosophical canons in their mode of exposition and explanation, and by the effort to elevate philosophical procedure in an appropriate way to the service of revealed truth.[9] Now tell me if the name "Dark Ages" is an appropriate descriptive name for the Medieval Ages.

The philosophy created by medieval theologians was, moreover, the technical medium with which they aimed to express the monastic Christianity of the Fathers in a truly intellectual way and to formulate the truths of the Christian religion, so far was this was possible, as a humanly communicable and teachable doctrine. As a theological tool, philosophy lived and functioned within the several theologies of the professors in the faculty of theology at Paris and elsewhere, and it was naturally shaped by it. Indeed, the philosophy of each medieval theologian was part of his theology; however recognizable in its rationality, it was not separated from the theological body in which it was developed as a theological

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[9]Cf. Gilson, op. cit., p. 140-142.

instrument.

The more we see scholastic philosophy in this way the more we are driven to recognize the speculative power of medieval theologian and the true signature of thirteenth century philosophy. This was not primarily the century in which Christian thinkers learned from Aristotle how to be philosophers. This was, first and foremost, the century in which, face to face with the purely philosophical wisdom of Aristotle, and with all the doctrinal and technical challenges embodied in that wisdom, Christian thinkers created a theological wisdom in answer to it, a wisdom rooted in revelation but in communication with the metaphysical world of Aristotelianism through its own human intellectual structure. We are the heirs of this theological wisdom of the 13th century and we have lived, as did others before us, in the intellectual world and on the doctrinal capital created by it.

The Scholastic Synthesis in the Modern World

In one of his writings, Maurice de Wulf saw the need for a Catholic return to Thomism in the modern world. Writing about Cardinal Mercier, de Wulf saw not only a fearless prelate and statesman but also a powerful figure whom he regarded as an intrument for this return to Thomism.[10] But I have to emphasize the character of this return which de Wulf stressed. According to de Wulf, Mercier was returning to Thomism as a free and open philosophy and "he opposed the idea of reducing philosophy to a kind of dogmatic vassalage."[11] Philosophy, among many other things, requires independent research and a disinterested pursuit of the whole truth without regard to consequences. It requires two characteristics that de Wulf saw in Mercier, namely, the complete and fearless commitment to philosophy to the world of modern science, including its method and data, and an equally fearless belief in the harmony of philosophy and theology or religion as distinct disciplines.[12] From this point of view, the return to Thomism is not a backward step, a return into the "darkness of the middle ages", but rather a willingness to let Thomism live and

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[10]Cf. De Wulf, op. cit., p. 40-57.
[11]Ibid., p. 43.
[12]Cf. Ibid., p. 46-48.

take its chances as a philosophy in the modern world. Thus did Thomism become Neo-Thomism, and thus did de Wulf discover the perennial scholastic philosophy whose most gifted is St. Thomas Aquinas. If Mercier was leading men back to St. Thomas Aquinas, it was because the main theories of Thomism – such as pluralism, the dangers of monism, respect of the human person, the prestige of abstract ideas, the central place of God elevated above the world and distinct from it – expresses the deepest aspirations of modern civilization.[13] But then again, such a view will not be easily accepted especially in a highly secularized society. For many modern thinkers, Christian Philosophy (and this includes Thomism of course) can never be a philosophy because it remains a method to expound religious truths and dogmatic doctrines.

The idea that Christian philosophy was born within theology, recognizable as philosophy in the specificity of its ideas and thus engaged in theological ministry is not an easy idea to grasp. In part, it is not easy because we are used to modern categories, for example, to the view that theology is limited in the realm of metaphysics, while philosophy has for its domain naturally knowable truths. Such, however, was the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. We find it difficult to think that theology can generate a philosophy within itself as its own human instrument. We tend to think that philosophy as *ancilla theologiae* not only defines the nature of scholastic philosophy but also emphasizes its subjection to theology. For, if scholastic philosophy is the handmaid of theology, is it not a servant, an enslaved human reality? Indeed, Philosophy as the "servant of theology" not only defines the nature of scholastic philosophy but also emphasizes its subjection to theology.

Yet, I must emphasize, it is in theology that philosophy is a servant of theology, not in its nature even as a Christian philosophy; and in theology the ministry of philosophy is a higher vocation and for this reason alone a service. Philosophy is a servant only within the household of her mistress; she is a servant not of another human science but of that which is divinely revealed truth in theology. What servitude is it to be a servant of God? Such, for St. Thomas Aquinas, is the ministerial role of philosophy in theology. In the hands of the theologian philosophy is no longer a purely

[13]Cf. Ibid., p. 50-51.

human science; it shares in the divine foundation and mission of his work, and if it contributes the human intelligence and metaphysics for such a work, its role is not to give a philosophical account of mystery. Only, to do so defines, not its nature, but its ministry; and that it can do so presupposes a unity of truth between revelation and reason that is one of the deeper marks of Thomistic theology.

Furthermore, it must also be stressed that it was theologians who created what has been called autonomous philosophy. It was theologians who taught us the very distinction between philosophy and theology that we have used so freely against theology in the modern world. Surely, to isolate philosophy from theology by means of distnctions forged by theologians is in some sense to fight a battle where there is no war. We owe medieval theologians the very ideals of of philosophical freedom and rationality that we are defending today. It is time that we return, not so much to the ideals in themselves, since we never abandoned them, but to the mystery surrounding their creation. After playing the sterile game of agreeing with the reason of the rationalist and the unbeliever, after trying for several centuries to defend reason by posing as pure philosophers in the world of the philosophers, today the scholastic philosopher – and especially the Thomist – is in a position to face directly the mystery of a philosophy that was born in a Christian climate and within the world of theology.

The ministerial role of philosophy within theology is a higher mode of life than reason can pretend to; in theology philosophy is genuine reason, but a religious one, and its rational work consists in letting faith speak through it. Though with infinite inadequacy, the theologian can still try to speak with a human language but in the line of divine revelation among men because this human world belongs to the same world of truth as does revelation. In the words of St. Bonaventure: "Both are from God, both are directed at man, both constitute a single providential divine order in which man is living.

The ministerial role of philosophy within theology, far from being in any sense a servitude, is the acceptance of total freedom in the presence of divine truth. The purpose of its ministry is to bring human truth, humanly acquired, to the work of building, under the leadership and the guidance of faith, divine truth in the

form of human edifice – theology.

Once we locate the ministerial role of the scholastic philosophy where it belongs, namely, not in itself but in the light of divinely revealed truth, we are in a position to recognize both the nature and the vocation of such a philosophy. It is a Christian philosophy and, as a philosophy, it has a Christian mission. As a philosophy, it is open to the influence of faith, and its vocation is to be, not one more philosophy in the world, but a bridge between philosophy and theology. It is a philosophy engaged in two dialogues, with the philosophers and with the theologians, and it is called upon to live at the boundary between reason and revelation, between pure philosophy and the doctrine of faith.

Thus a student of philosophy who is disposed in the Sacred Sciences should not cower in fear before the fiercest critics of religious philosophical thinking. The Scholastics have left a lasting legacy that no postmodern thinker can easily eradicate. They are the first one to take the initial step in this effort when they accept without reservation the principle that seems to have guided St. Thomas Aquinas, namely, that barring human feelings, philosophy and theology can never disagree. I now enjoin you to commit yourself to being fully and without fear a philosopher rather than a philosophical critic, openly accepting and acknowledging that there is a religious light at the center of your mind and show that the effect of this very light is to open the understanding to a deeper awareness of truth. If Martin Heidegger thinks that a Christian philosophy is not possible because philosophy is inquiry and the Christian does not inquire, let the Christian in philosophy show that revelation has not replaced philosophy nor does faith substitute for reason. Let him show in detail that when scholasticism flowered in the 13th century it was an authentic intellectual inquiry conducted by men who were believers and theologians. It was no less an authentic inquiry for being the work of theologians; on the contrary, its theological service provoked its creativeness.

To be sure, philosophy is not needed to establish religious truths since these rest on the authority of God Himself. But you need philosophy for the sake of men. And the brand of philosophy that you will need is scholasticism. It is the sort of philosophy that lives only as a Christian philosophy in a world illumined by faith,

in which theologians speak for God with the language of reason in order to draw men to the Christian revelation. Indeed, it is the intellectual bridge between faith and reason that pastors must cross in speaking for God to men and that the philosopher himself must finally come to cross in speaking for man on his way to God.

And for those who are not disposed into Christian philosophy, understand that Scholasticism was born as such a philosophy so engaged. Had there been no scholastic theology – a theology speaking the metaphysical language of Being – there would have been no world beyond philosophy to which philosophy might be open and in whose light it might strengthen its own. Thus, the Christian character of scholastic philosophy – and, first and foremost, of Thomism – identifies its nature and reveals its mission. As a philosophy, it has the nature to live only in a world in which nature and reason are engaged in their own way within a higher order of truth that both includes and transcends them. Scholasticism is the sort of philosophy that lives only as a Christian philosophy in a world illumined by faith, in which theologians speak for God with the language of reason in order to draw men to the Christian revelation.

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