On Christianity and the Interpretation of Philosophy

A Philosophical Happy Hour on the influences of Christian belief on philosophical interpretation, and of philosophical wisdom on the practice of the Christian faith.

Augustine of Hippo (350–430)

Few works have approached this discussion more extensively than St. Augustine of Hippo's *De civitate Dei* (*On the City of God*). Though there are many passages within the text that speak to the relationship between reason and revelation, the first chapter of Book VIII takes a position that will inspire many further Christians in their interpretation. Augustine writes:[1]

> Natural theology is neither the fabulous nor the civic theology; that is, it is neither the theology of the theater nor the theology of the city, of which the one parades the crimes of the gods and the other displays their still more criminal desires (and so indicates that they are actually malignant demons rather than gods). And so in this case we must discuss the issues with the philosophers, whose very name, if translated into Latin, declares their love of wisdom.
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> And if God, who made all things, is wisdom, as divine authority and truth have shown, then the true philosopher is a lover of God. But since the thing itself, to which we give this name, is not found in all who boast of the name — for it is not necessarily the case that those who are called philosophers are lovers of true wisdom — we obviously have to make a selection from all the philosophers whose views we have been able to ascertain from their writings. From these we need to choose the ones with whom the question may be treated at the level it deserves. For I have not set out in this work to refute all the empty opinions of all philosophers but only those views which have to do with theology (a Greek word which we understand to signify reasoning or speaking about the divine). Nor have I set out to refute the views on theology of all philosophers. Rather, I address only the views of those philosophers who agree that the divine exists and that it cares about human affairs, but who still do not consider the worship of one immutable God sufficient to attain a life of blessedness, even after death. Instead, these philosophers hold that to achieve this end we must also worship many gods who were created and established by that one God.
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> These philosophers come closer to the truth than even Varro did. He was able to extend the whole reach of natural theology only as far as this world and its soul, but they acknowledge a God above the whole realm of soul, a God who made not only this visible world, which is often called heaven and earth, but also every soul whatsoever. They acknowledge, too, that it is this God who makes the rational and intellectual soul — and the human soul is of this kind — blessed by participation in his immutable and incorporeal light. Anyone with even the slightest grasp of these matters knows that these philosophers are called Platonists…

Moses Maimonides (1138–1204)

A Sephardic rabbi and Torah scholar who lived in what is now southern Spain, Maimonides was familiar not only with his own tradition but also those of Christianity and Islam, as well as the philosophical works of Aristotle, Al-Farabi, Ibn-Sina (Avicenna), and Ibn-Rushd (Averroes). In his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides

[1] Augustine c.426AD: *De civitate Dei*, lib.8, c.1 (Babcock trans.).

addresses the difficulties that stem from natural reason and the expressions of revelation in many passages, including the following from its introductory letter:[2]

> Human reason draws such a person [the spiritually mature of settled mind and commitment to the truths of faith] invitingly to its domain, but he is troubled by the surface sense of certain biblical expressions. Resisting what he still takes (or was taught) is the meaning of its multivalent, metaphorical, or ambiguous words, he hangs back, perplexed and confused. Should he follow his reason, reject what he took those words to say, and presume that he has shed core biblical precepts? Or should he hold fast to what he took those words to mean and fight reason's sway, dig in his heels and resist, feeling injured by reason, as it had sullied his faith, retain his fanciful beliefs, yet remain deeply troubled by anxiety and disquiet.
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> God—exalted by His very mention—wished to perfect us and enhance our lives in society with His practical laws. But this required our attaining certain intellectual convictions—chiefly, an awareness of Him, so far as we are able. That depends on metaphysics, theological knowledge, which is won only after a study of natural science. For physics borders on metaphysics and is its prerequisite, as its students clearly see. That is why God opens His book with the Account of Creation, which belongs to physics, as I explained.
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> Given the immensity and sublimity of the idea of creation and our incapacity to grasp such ultimates themselves, the profundities that divine wisdom saw we need were broached to us obliquely and poetically—in words quite baffling. As the Sages say, "it is impossible to convey to flesh and blood the power of the Creative Act, so Scripture baldly tells you, *In the beginning God created…*"—putting you on notice that these things are ineffable. You know Solomon's words: *Far off it was, and deep, deep—who can plumb it!* (Ecclesiastes 7:24). Everything about it is couched in multivalent terms. So the masses take it as best their limited understanding permits; but the astute, if they are learned, take it otherwise.

Thomas Aquinas (1225—1274)

The greatest theologian—and arguably the best philosophical mind—within the Catholic tradition. Let us consider the first question of the *Summa Theologiae*, both the body and the response to the second objection:[3]

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[2] Maimonides i.1186-90: *The Guide to the Perplexed*, "Introduction" (1.3a and 1.5a; Goodman and Lieberman trans.), p.6 and 10.

[3] Because the translations of Aquinas are my own, I have included here the Latin. Aquinas 1266-68: *ST* Ia, q.1, a.1, c. and ad.2: "Respondeo dicendum quod necessarium fuit ad humanam salutem, esse doctrinam quandam secundum revelationem divinam, praeter philosophicas disciplinas, quae ratione humana investigantur. Primo quidem, quia homo ordinatur ad Deum sicut ad quendam finem qui comprehensionem rationis excedit, secundum illud Isaiae LXIV, *oculus non vidit Deus absque te, quae praeparasti diligentibus te*. Finem autem oportet esse praecognitum hominibus, qui suas intentiones et actiones debent ordinare in finem. Unde necessarium fuit homini ad salutem, quod ei nota fierent quaedam per revelationem divinam, quae rationem humanam excedunt. Ad ea etiam quae de Deo ratione humana investigari possunt, necessarium fuit hominem instrui revelatione divina. Quia veritas de Deo, per rationem investigata, a paucis, et per longum tempus, et cum admixtione multorum errorum, homini proveniret, a cuius tamen veritatis cognitione dependet tota hominis salus, quae in Deo est. Ut igitur salus hominibus et convenientius et certius proveniat, necessarium fuit quod de divinis per divinam revelationem instruantur. Necessarium igitur fuit, praeter philosophicas disciplinas, quae per rationem investigantur, sacram doctrinam per revelationem haberi." – "Ad secundum dicendum quod diversa ratio cognoscibilis diversitatem scientiarum inducit. Eandem enim conclusionem demonstrat astrologus et naturalis, puta quod terra est rotunda, sed astrologus per medium mathematicum, idest a materia abstractum; naturalis autem per medium circa materiam consideratum. Unde nihil prohibet de eisdem rebus, de quibus philosophicae disciplinae tractant secundum quod sunt cognoscibilia lumine naturalis rationis, et aliam scientiam tractare secundum quod

I answer, it must be said that it was necessary for the salvation of mankind for there to be a certain teaching according to divine revelation, beyond the philosophical disciplines, which are investigated by human reason.

First, because man is ordained to God as to a certain end that exceeds the comprehension of his reason, according to that which is written in Isaiah 64: "The eye hath not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that love Thee." But it is necessary for the end to be cognitively grasped by men before they order their intentions and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the sake of man's salvation that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him through divine revelation.

Even respecting those things concerning God which the human is able to investigate through reason, it was necessary for man to be instructed by divine revelation. This is because the truth about God, investigated through the use of reason which belongs to man, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors; nevertheless upon the cognition of this truth, depends man's whole salvation, which is in God. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men may come into being more fittingly and more certainly, it was necessary that they should be instructed about the divine by divine revelation.

It was therefore necessary that, besides the philosophical disciplines which are investigated through reason, to have a sacred doctrine through revelation.

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To the second it must be said that the diversity of the sciences is established according to the diverse rationale of cognoscible things. For the astronomer and the natural philosopher may both demonstrate the same conclusion, such as that the earth is round; but the astronomer does so through a mathematical medium, that is, abstracting from matter; while the natural philosopher does so through considering the means of the matter itself. Whence nothing prohibits the same things which are treated by some of the philosophical disciplines inasmuch as they are cognoscible under the light of natural reason, from being treated according to what is cognized by the light of divine revelation. Whence theology which belongs to sacred doctrine differs according to its genus from that theology which is posited as a part of philosophy.

We may also consider c.8 in Book I of the *Summa contra Gentiles*:[4]

It seems we must also consider that sensible things, from which human reason takes its cognition of principles, retain a certain vestige of divine imitation in themselves, although so imperfectly that it is entirely insufficient for declaring the substance of God Himself to be discovered. For effects have a similitude to their causes according to [the causes'] own mode, since the agent acts to produce its like:

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cognoscuntur lumine divinae revelationis. Unde theologia quae ad sacram doctrinam pertinet, differt secundum genus ab illa theologia quae pars philosophiae ponitur."

[4] 1259/65: *SCG*, lib.1, c.8: "Considerandum etiam videtur quod res quidem sensibiles, ex quibus humana ratio cognitionis principium sumit, aliquale vestigium in se divinae imitationis retinent, ita tamen imperfectum quod ad declarandam ipsius Dei substantiam omnino insufficiens invenitur. Habent enim effectus suarum causarum suo modo similitudinem, cum agens agat sibi simile: non tamen effectus ad perfectam agentis similitudinem semper pertingit. Humana igitur ratio ad cognoscendum fidei veritatem, quae solum videntibus divinam substantiam potest esse notissima, ita se habet quod ad eam potest aliquas verisimilitudines colligere, quae tamen non sufficiunt ad hoc quod praedicta veritas quasi demonstrative vel per se intellecta comprehendatur. Utile tamen est ut in huiusmodi rationibus, quantumcumque debilibus, se mens humana exerceat, dummodo desit comprehendendi vel demonstrandi praesumptio: quia de rebus altissimis etiam parva et debili consideratione aliquid posse inspicere iucundissimum est..."

> nevertheless the effect does not always attain to the perfect similitude of the agent. Therefore, human reason holds itself towards the cognition of the truth of faith, which can only be most properly known by those seeing the divine substance, to the degree that it is able to colligate certain verisimilitudes, which nevertheless do not suffice for that truth to be comprehended in a demonstrative mode or as though understood through itself.
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> Nevertheless there is a utility in rationales of this kind, however weak they may be, for the mind of the human being to exercise upon them, so long as it does not presume to have comprehended or demonstrated them: because the least and weakest consideration able to catch a glimpse of something belonging to the highest things is the greatest joy...

Baruch Spinoza (1632—1677)

A rather radical and controversial figure who rejected his Jewish heritage and its teachings, and thus expelled from the community, Spinoza had a profound influence on the development of Enlightenment thought, and especially upon the attitude towards Scripture. As he writes in his *Theological-Political Treatise*:[5]

> I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting Nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it. For the method of interpreting Nature consists essentially in composing a detailed study of Nature from which, as being the source of our assured data, we can deduce the definitions of the things of Nature. Now in exactly the same way the task of Scriptural interpretation requires us to make a straightforward study of Scripture, and from this, as the source of our fixed data and principles, to deduce by logical inference the meaning of the authors of Scripture. In this way—that is, by allowing no other principles or data for the interpretation of Scripture and study of its contents except those that can be gathered only from Scripture itself and from a historical study of Scripture—steady progress can be made without any danger of error, and one can deal with matters that surpass our understanding with no less confidence than those matters which are known to us by the natural light of reason.

Étienne Gilson (1884–1978) and Anton Pegis (1905–1978)

The term "Christian philosophy" is today widely used in no small part due to Étienne Gilson, whose work in the twentieth-century helped to spur on the Scholastic and especially Thomistic revivals. In his Gifford Lectures of 1931-32, edited and published under the title *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, Gilson takes up the "problem of Christian philosophy", raised in his time against the backdrop of Enlightenment rationalism. But he does this principally through the lens of earlier centuries. As such, he writes:[6]

> If we could ask the mediaeval thinkers by what right they called themselves philosophers we should obtain some very different answers. Some, without doubt, would reply that they felt no interest in the title at all—they would be quite content with that of Christian—what better one could they possibly have? Here we might cite such resolute opponents of dialectic as St. Bernard and St. Peter Damian, but even if we put aside such extreme cases, we should find hardly nay, save the Averroists, who would admit the legitimacy of an exercise of reason that would be purely philosophical and systematically withdrawn from the influence of faith. The normal view, as expressed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, would be well represented by St. Anselm and St. Bonaventure, who, for the rest, would justly claim descent from St. Augustine. They would certainly regard an exercise of pure reason as a possibility—after Plato and Aristotle, who could doubt it?—but they would view the matter not so much from the standpoint of the mere definition of

[5] Spinoza 1670: *Theological-Political Treatise*, c.7, p.457 (Shirley trans. in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, edited by Michael L. Morgan).
[6] Gilson 1931-32: *Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 4-5.

> reason as from that of the actual conditions of fact under which it has to work. Now it is a fac that between ourselves and the Greeks the Christian revelation has intervened, and has profoundly modified the conditions under which reason has to work. Once you are in possession of that revelation how can you possibly philosophize as though you had never heard of it? The errors of Plato and Aristotle are precisely the errors into which pure reason falls, and every philosophy which sets out to be self-sufficing will fall into them again, or perhaps int others still worse; so that henceforth the only safe plan is to take revelation for our guide and make an effort to understand its contents—and this understanding of the contents of revelation will be philosophy itself. *Fides quarens intellectum*: that is the basic principle of all mediaeval speculation, but is it not also a mere confusion of philosophy with theology? And, if so, do we not run a risk of ruining the former altogether?

And, a bit farther on: "There is no such thing as a Christian reason, but there may very well be a Christian exercise of reason."[7]

Anton Pegis, a student of Gilson's at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies at the University of Toronto, likewise delivered a lecture on the theme in 1955, published under the title, *The Middle Ages and Philosophy: On the Ambivalence of Modern Scholasticism*. Many passages in this short text deserve attention, but let us turn to two. First:[8]

> How, indeed, could Christianity have an authentic encounter with Aristotelian 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, 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*. 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 within faith and built a bridge from revelation to reason.

Second:[9]

> Once we locate the ministerial role of 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 *doctrina fidei*. To the philosophers its mission is to speak as a Christian philosophy, with an open and genuine acceptance of both the noun and the adjective in its name. It must speak as an engaged philosophy—as truly engaged as are the philosophies of Jaspers and Heidegger, who wish to be nothing but philosophers. To such men it must prove by its philosophical engagement, the authenticity of its effort. It cannot do this by pretending to be a-Christian as a philosophy; it can do this only by working to show, by the evidence of its own reality, that the Christian religion can inspire and promote philosophical doctrines, just as it can show on historical grounds that the philosophers have lived rather frequently on religious capital without knowing it.

[7] 1931-32: *Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 12.
[8] 1955: *The Middle Ages and Philosophy*, 60.
[9] 1955: *The Middle Ages and Philosophy*, 90-91.