

Practical Considerations about Teaching Philosophy and Theology Now¹
for *Restoring Faith In Reason, A New Translation of the Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II together
with a commentary and discussion*, edited by Laurence Paul Hemming and Susan Frank Parsons
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Theology and metaphysics or first philosophy are theoretical disciplines anticipating and preparing us for contemplative union. Subordinating them to ends beneath this highest good diminishes their proper freedom. This liberty derives from their relation to the end in itself, by nature elevated beyond being used. The destruction of this freedom is, and ultimately proves itself to be, both impossible and ruinous for those who attempt to manipulate truth. Such subordinations and manipulations are the special temptations of the Church generally, from top to bottom, as well as of those who are particularly called to tell the truth in her. Theologians and philosophers who have surrendered *theoria* to *praxis* and *poiêsis*, and who need a severe *metanoia* may be willing to listen to the plea in *Fides et Ratio* to respect the integrity of truth so far as it comes from the same Pope who used the turn of the millennium for ecclesial repentance.

It is impossible to come to *Fides et Ratio* without drawing back at the recollection of the *Aeterni Patris* of Leo XIII, the centenary of which occurred in the reign of John Paul II. Leo's encyclicals of hundred years ago have greatly influenced the present Pontiff. Though the subject of the two letters is the same – faith and reason looked at largely in terms of theology and philosophy – their differences are crucially important. The present Encyclical is more narrowly concerned with the state of the Church's intellectual life, does not impose a particular philosophy – even if certain directions are lamented and criticised, others proposed and hoped for. *Fides et Ratio* may perhaps be an act of reparation so far as it recommends thinkers condemned or dismissed in the Nineteenth-century turn to Neo-Thomism. In that vain attempt to remedy her political and social situation as well as to resist Modernity, the Church was guilty of fabricating a philosophy, falsely projected on to St. Thomas for purposes alien to his own. Though I suggest below that its results were not all bad, in the Church we are still troubled everywhere and everyday by the wreckage remaining from the collapse of that impossible and typically Modern experiment in exploiting the philosophical past. The revolutionary iconoclasm of the necessary reaction against it leave us impoverished. We have also the sad recollection of the miserable abuse of the medievals whose thought was colonised. Real, fruitful, and distinctive intellectual Catholic engagement with modern philosophy was condemned, while Thomas was reconstructed as a modern rationalist in the war against modern rationalism. Only since Vatican II liberated him from servitude, has Aquinas been able to make his particular contribution authentically. Freed from having to bless every enterprise of philosophical theology which sought ecclesiastical approbation, his own proper thought now enjoys the revival which its excellence merits and excites.

In any new attempt to enter the middle ground between philosophy and theology, the Church now, so far as it has an organised practical will, must respect the freedom of the philosophical and theological spirit. The nature of the things themselves requires it. And because it is essential to her own endeavour to restore *theoria*, and because of her terrible experience with the alternative, she must let 'the wind blow where it wills' trusting in the

¹ Begun while I was a Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall in Cambridge University and completed when I was a Visiting Scholar at Boston College and Harvard University, this paper owes much to my hosts, whom I thank.

Spirit of truth. How, then, can there be practical considerations about teaching philosophy and theology now?

Fides et Ratio identifies grave problems in present philosophy, in the relations of philosophy and theology, and consequently in theology. These cannot be rectified by the creation of philosophies or theologies to order, or by the anachronistic retrieval and manipulation of past intellectual forms as if they were ours immediately. However, the provision of the right circumstances for the study and teaching of philosophy and theology is of necessity a practical matter -- for this we have colleges, universities, seminaries, institutes, and *studia*, professors and deans, credentials, degrees, and certificates, etc. Here there is much which urgently needs doing.

A. PHILOSOPHIA ANCILLA THEOLOGIAE

One of the most lamentable recent developments in the Anglo-American world is the more and more general possibility of studying theology as a first degree. I distinguish this from the availability or even prescription of a limited number of classes in theology as a supplement to other arts and sciences, including philosophy, provisions which may be appropriate. Students, often nearly illiterate even at the greatest universities, are encouraged to make theology their primary study. By illiterate I mean that very many of them cannot write or speak grammatically, let alone in a decent literary or rhetorical style. Even worse, these same students cannot read, i.e. they cannot get beyond 'word-bites' to the logical structure of a sentence, a paragraph, or an essay. They think, speak, and write in clichés. Most of them have no language except English (and that barbarically). If another language has been acquired, it will rarely be Greek, Latin, or Hebrew, and it will usually have been taught in the present conversational mode, which excludes analysis of grammatical structure. Such students will have virtually no philosophy beyond the sentimental, ideological, or doxological treatments schools sometimes provide. The result is a student who has little capacity to read texts (and almost certainly no discipline of reading), who knows nothing of the history of philosophy or of culture generally, and who has no training in discerning or critically examining arguments. Such students can be told almost anything. And they are!

Theological movements now sweeping the Anglo-American world feed upon these kinds of illiteracy, upon ignorance of history, literature, and philosophy, and upon the absence of a disciplined critical faculty. What passes for theology are, in fact, ideological phantasies or fables about our origins and cultural history. Their authors, supposing that they write in a poetic ecstasy, instead produce yet another form of the past pre-packaged for touristic consumption. We have another 'colonisation' of the philosophical and theological tradition, but this time with a sophisticated Postmodern 'strategy of deception'.² Representations of that history, set out by teachers without the tools or disciplines to write it, commit the most elementary errors.³ These are accepted by students without knowledge of the texts being manipulated and without the capacities needed to judge what they are being taught. Philosophy has been absorbed within this pseudo-theology. The proper distance between the two disciplines and their proper autonomy are denied. Though such movements are praised (with some justice if the circumstances in which they have arisen are

² J. Hanvey, 'Conclusion: Continuing the Conversation,' in *Radical Orthodoxy? - A Catholic Inquiry*, ed. L.P. Hemming (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 155 and 164.

³ See N. Lash, 'Where does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy? Questions on Milbank's Aquinas', *Modern Theology*, 15:4 (1999), 433-444; W.J. Hankey, 'Why Philosophy Abides for Aquinas', *The Heythrop Journal*, 42:3 (2001), 329-348.

considered) for opening theology to its wider tradition and resources, in fact, students are deprived of truth about the tradition at the same moment that they suppose they have gained access to it. Their state is a dangerous union of ignorance and arrogance. Those who have respect for the dignity and needs of theology – and this is surely a place for ecumenical co-operation – will seek the required educational reforms. In the broadest sense, this entails the restoration of philosophical study – as *Fides et Ratio* maintains. Here the Catholic Church, in part because of what was positive in her experience in the Neo-Thomist revival, has something particular to contribute.

Some of Pope John Paul's hopes and prescriptions for philosophy in *Fides et Ratio* may seem too determined by his own intellectual experience, horizons and history, and may appear too much the habitual repetition of typical Catholic judgments, to recommend themselves outside a narrow circle. What, however, in them seems altogether necessary to correct the present distortions of our minds, is the call to a deeper wonder and awe, to genuine openness and receptivity, to *theoria* and contemplation as both necessary to the beginning, and also subsisting at the heart, of philosophy.

The lack of these in most of Anglo-American 'Analytic' philosophy has driven theologians, especially in England where little else is available at the centres which establish the norms, to the absorption of philosophy within theology. Their good purposes are both to challenge the arrogance of secular reason and to provide the Christian mind, imagination, memory, and love with what is broader, deeper, and richer than the 'Analytic' tradition usually provides. These theologians rightly aim to restore to philosophy herself the millennium and a half largely missing from the normative Anglo-American philosophical memory. The universities at the imperial centres, whose certified 'philosophers' prescribe what counts as reason in our world, normally exclude from 'Philosophy' what falls between Ancient Skepticism and Descartes. Eliminated from 'Philosophy' are those Platonisms, ancient and mediaeval, which were essential to the formation of Christian doctrine and in which philosophy, theology, and religion recognised and embraced their mutual dependence. By this exclusion, these universities and their 'philosophers' serve and subordinately determine the structures of the secularized Protestant world.

Philosophy in the Catholic colleges and universities of the Anglo-American world – which substantially means North America, the place of almost all of these – has a different history and character from that in Britain, or in the state or private, but definitively secularized Protestant universities of America. This Catholic difference is the result of the reign of Neo-Thomism.⁴ In Catholic institutions, the reaction against the narrow, sharply ideological, and exclusive rationalism of this Thomism – ironically comparable in this regard to 'Analytic' philosophy – turned enough toward 'Continental' philosophy to produce a pluralism not found at Oxbridge and scarcely in the Protestant Ivy League.⁵ During and after Vatican II, Catholic philosophers and theologians discovered much of what they had sought in Thomism in various renditions of Heidegger. His engagement with the sweep of Western history entailed, sometimes paradoxically, that Catholic philosophy included or even privileged what Protestant secular philosophy excluded. Ironically, the Platonic tradition, and its 'negative theology', were retrieved as a substitute for, or way of saving, mediaeval

⁴ See W.J. Hankey, 'From Metaphysics to History, from Exodus to Neoplatonism, from Scholasticism to Pluralism: the fate of Gilsonian Thomism in English-speaking North America,' *Dionysius*, 16 (1998), 157-188.

⁵ See J.D. Caputo, 'Philosophy and Prophetic Postmodernism: Toward a Catholic Postmodernity,' *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 74:4 (2001), 549-567, especially 550-555.

philosophy from Heidegger's critique.⁶ Now, however, as Catholics move into the centres of power and prestige, and as 'Continental' philosophy enters new stages of postmodern deconstruction, the temptation is to 'up-grade' to the imperial centre, to increase power and respectability by accepting its defining exclusions. To do this would be not only to conform our minds to the ruling secular culture, but also to throw away part of what has been so painfully gained in the last two centuries of struggle about philosophy within the Church.

Fidelity to that experience requires that, after freedom, the first characteristic of philosophy, as it is cultivated among us, must be openness to its full history and to the full range of its schools, traditions, and methods. The freedom which is essential to philosophy and to the academy means that, in principle, providing for this should be left to the philosophers themselves, but intervention from above will be required when the *odium philosophicum* reaches as far as its periodically ascendant desire to win the argument by purging the adversaries.

B. LEARNING TO READ

I have treated the necessity for the study of philosophy as distinct from and preliminary to theology under the traditional (and also Thomistic, though not exclusively)⁷, tag *philosophia ancilla theologiae*. This is in part to prevent the assumption that philosophy is preliminary in the sense that its study (and especially those parts of it most necessary for theology) can be completed some time before taking up the disciplines of theology. Neither Plato nor Aristotle supposed that the young were capable of the highest philosophical work. Aquinas follows them, Moses Maimonides, and others in this. The abstractness of philosophy generally, and of metaphysics particularly, the weakness of our minds which must be strengthened by mathematical and other studies, the extent of the ground which must be covered to reach it, the length of time traversing this takes, the need for developed moral virtues and the proper temperament, are all reasons why we require the gift of faith.⁸ Faith gives a knowledge necessary for salvation which philosophy cannot by itself attain. Nonetheless, philosophy, acquired with such difficulty, remains subordinately necessary not only because one of its parts is theology, but also for the sake of that theology which is Sacred Doctrine.

Formally reading (*lectio*), i.e. expositing and commenting on the works of Aristotle, an activity by which Aquinas carried forward the philosophical tradition as it had come down to him from the Arabs and late Antiquity, was not a preliminary exercise belonging to Thomas' early years. Almost all of his twelve commentaries on the works of The Philosopher were undertaken in the last six years of his writing and, like the *Summa Theologiae*, five were left unfinished.⁹ Since this reading continued along with the writing of his own proper *Summa*,

⁶ See Caputo, 'Philosophy and Prophetic Postmodernism,' 555-567; J.-M. Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis: Plotin, Proclus, Heidegger*, L'ane d'or 15 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001) and W.J. Hankey, 'Denys and Aquinas: Antimodern Cold and Postmodern Hot,' *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones, Studies in Christian Origins (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 139-184.

⁷ See *Summa Theologiae* 1.5 ad 2, and R.D. Crouse, 'St. Thomas, St. Albert, Aristotle: *Philosophia Ancilla Theologiae*,' *Atti del Congresso Internazionale Tommaso nel suo settimo centenario*, i (Naples: Edizioni Domenicane Italiane, 1975), 181-85.

⁸ *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, 6.7 (Leonine 47/2, pp. 358-359); *Super Boetium de Trinitate*, 3.1 (Leonine 50, p. 108); *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate*, 14.10 (Leonine 22/2, p. 467); *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.1.1; *Super Librum de Causis Expositio*, prooemium (Saffrey p.2).

⁹ I. Aertsen, 'Aquinas's Philosophy in its Historical Setting,' *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. N. Kretzmann and E. Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 20; M.D. Jordan, *The Alleged*

Aquinas clearly found engaging the philosophical tradition to be necessary to his work as a Christian theologian. In our circumstances, were the study of philosophy to be completed as a temporal preliminary to the study of Sacred Doctrine, it would have been reduced either to a contentless lexicon, or to a sceptical sophistic, or to the dogmatic repetition of a 'science'. It would again have lost the freedom which belongs to its anticipatory participation in the absolute cosmic goal.

The kind of philosophical study which is temporally prior to proper theological thinking, and which is suitable for the young, is pointed to by reading (*lectio*), as Aquinas and his contemporaries practiced it. This reading was an act of critical reception. For Aquinas and his predecessors, *lectio* is not passive receptivity. It involves both philosophical and historical judgment. Historical investigation, dialectical inquiry, and rational demonstration are all part of philosophy as textual commentary. The commentator determines the subject and nature of the work, and to what philosophical tradition it belongs. The commentary shows how the text stands to that tradition, sorting out what in the work is genuinely within the philosophical school, what is inauthentic, what has been distorted, and where the author, moved perhaps by a better authority or reason, has taken another path. Aquinas distinguishes conclusions from the arguments which are supposed to support them. He seeks to identify the fundamental principles and the particular kinds of reasoning which distinguish schools from one another. He sorts out the contributions, oppositions, concords, and complementarities of the philosophical traditions. We need to imitate his patient and careful reading.

Nonetheless, to bring mediaeval *lectio* into the present, we must correct Aquinas' approach to compensate for the systematization, simplifications, and reductions of philosophy to which its Neo-Thomistic form showed it to be subject. We must broaden his history of philosophy both forwards and backwards – Aquinas probably never read a dialogue of Plato! The study of philosophy proper must be supplemented with, and even grounded in, the linguistic, literary, and historical knowledge and appreciation he lacked – in short with what the Renaissance Humanists added to education. And recollecting that philosophy once included these, we must add what of modern mathematics, natural and social science is necessary to appreciate the Modern construction of the human world. In short, the preliminary to theological study is an option within the Liberal Arts and Science undergraduate curriculum as it has been developed in North America. The traditional forms of that curriculum must be modified to match the present 'illiterate' student as I have defined him or her above. This modification involves facing frankly the point from which education now begins for most students, but not relenting on the linguistic, literary, historical, mathematical, scientific, and philosophical requirements which theological study makes.

I have already named some of the characteristics of the study which is preliminary to sacred doctrine: freedom, openness to the full history of philosophy and to the full range of its schools, traditions, and methods, actively receptive reading which is careful, patient, and critical. To these must be added the breadth and depth of a humanistic and modern liberal education. The alternatives are either a return to the Scylla of philosophy as Neo-Scholastic dogmatism or the disintegration of history and philosophy in the Charybdis of theology as Postmodern mythopoiesis. The Holy Father is right to set us a task which begins by rejecting both of these.

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