

Considerations on the Relationship between Theology and Philosophy

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ABSTRACT: Throughout history, theology and philosophy have had many interactions, with the theologian and the philosopher often being discussion partners. Theology and philosophy each have a particular understanding of life and seek to present a specific perspective on reality. The theology-philosophy relationship has taken different forms, beginning with the demarcation of theology from philosophy, continuing with the view that theology can be elucidated with the help of philosophy, and including the idea that philosophy can sometimes give rise to theology. The last two orientations suggest that theology can be evaluated by philosophy—that is, philosophy can even provide content for theology.

KEYWORDS: history, theology, philosophy, theology-philosophy relationship

Introduction

The relationship between religion and philosophy has preoccupied the minds of the great thinkers of the ages. Our study will survey some of the considerations concerning this relationship between the two great fields of thought, ideas which have preoccupied the minds of men and have traversed the ages, ideas which have been presented at various events, ideas which have been set down in various works, and which we can benefit from today by highlighting the range of considerations on this subject.

Philosophical Considerations on the relationship between Theology and Philosophy

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) subjected the arguments of religion to a critique by reason, demanding that any discipline that raises the claim of knowledge, including theology, must pass through the tribunal of philosophical criticism (Marga, 2014, p. 38). A religious belief worthy of esteem, like all the convictions of the man who thinks with his mind, will have to be founded on reason. Kant also considered

that those who assert that in religious matters any other orientation than that according to reason should prevail are not well advised. A religion that unhesitatingly declares war on reason will not be able to stand up to it for long (Flonta, 2012, p.150). Kant understood religious emancipation as the process of man's elevation from the "revealed" historical religions to the *religion of reason*. Religion, "within the limits of pure reason", meant for Kant *the grounding of religion on practical reason*, in a clear demarcation from deistic or theistic attempts to ground religion on theoretical reason. As a belief in the existence of a supreme lawgiver, religion had for Kant an exclusively moral substance (Flonta, 2012, p.150). At the same time, Kant also considered that everything else that man thinks he can do to please God, apart from good behavior, is just religious fanaticism and a bad way of serving God. Theological knowledge is thus distinguished from Kantian knowledge by its fundamental premise, *revelation*, God being the One who reveals Himself to man by His own will. However, the relationship between reason and faith is not one of exclusion, but of complementarity. Reason distances God through the superphysical and the unknowable, while faith brings God closer to us through love. Thus religious knowledge does not take an anti-intellectualist stance, but considers that reason is only the first step, the step of the mind, complemented by the step of the loving heart (Costescu, 2014, p. 260). Through reason, one may affirm, 'Wonderful is Thy knowledge above me. It is high, and I cannot reach it' (Ps. 138:6), but through loving faith, one is able to proclaim, 'I love You, O Lord, my strength' (Ps. 17:1).

Karl Barth (1886-1968), a central figure in the theology of the first half of the 20th century, in his book *Epistle to the Romans - 1921*, wanted to give a new foundation to theology, which was assailed from various directions of life in modern society, and distanced himself from philosophy, proposing instead a Christian vision in all its aspects. According to his thesis, Paul's epistle to the Romans suffices as a basis for a thorough understanding of the world and Christianity (Marga, 2014, pp. 316-318). Laying the foundations for the "neo-orthodox" current in Protestant theology, he emphasized the traditional themes of Christianity, namely human sinfulness, the transcendence of God, particular revelation as the foundation of theology, the relationship between God and man being the theme of the Bible and the *summa* of philosophy as a whole (Marga, 2019, p. 101), considering that *theologians do not need philosophy*, which is torn by a bewildering variety of opinions, but *can remain with religion*.

The premise of a watershed debate, the epochal Habermas-Ratzinger debate, took place on January 19, 2004, and quickly gained worldwide resonance. However, there was little anticipation that Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger would meet in debate, not least because, in public perception, Habermas embodied *secular, liberal thinking*, and Cardinal Ratzinger represented the *Catholic faith*. It is also worth noting that Habermas and Ratzinger had previously predominantly critically reported each other's thinking. There were,

however, some favorable premises for a direct Habermas-Ratzinger debate, which the Katholische Akademie Bayern has exploited with inspiration and skill (Ratzinger–Benedict XVI, 2011, pp. 319-322).

The first premise is that the illustrious protagonists belong to the same generation and followed similar academic paths: Habermas at Heidelberg and at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, with a decade at the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg; Ratzinger at the universities of Bonn, Münster, Tübingen, and Regensburg. *The second premise* is that Habermas and Ratzinger belong to the first generation of philosophers and theologians trained in post-war Germany—a generation tasked with the exemplary responsibility of contributing to the country's reconstruction after the catastrophe of the war. *The third premise* is that, in the meantime, both Habermas and Ratzinger had developed comprehensive systems of thought in which they absorbed and responded to the crucial experiences and challenges of modern times. *The fourth premise* lies in the fact that Habermas and Ratzinger have come, through their own conceptualizations, to take up in their own terms and address one of the major difficulties faced in today's democracies: the *crisis of motivation*. *The fifth premise* consisted of the willingness and natural interest of a philosopher and a theologian of the highest order to unfold their own vision in dialogue with the other. The debate revealed an unexpectedly broad convergence between Habermas and Cardinal Ratzinger, both believing that *the age of the "handmaiden" in the relationship between philosophy and religion is over* and that *the solution is to work together and implicitly to move away from the position where one or the other claims to judge the other* in terms of truth or falsehood.

The common conclusions of the two great intellectuals can be summarized as follows: The resources of secularized European rationality are no longer sufficient to master existing crises, specifically the crisis of motivation in the democracies of a globalizing world; religion itself needs rationality to prevent the slide into fundamentalism that generates terrorism; we have stepped into a "post-secular society" and the secularization that Europe embarked on centuries ago today needs a complement that religion can provide; there are "pathologies of reason" and "pathologies of religion"; philosophy and religion must be open to learning from each other's historical experience and arguments (Ratzinger–Benedict XVI, 2011, p. 321).

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) was the first to argue that the time had come when *philosophy and theology* needed each other (Marga, 2014, p. 44). Far from awaiting each other's *end*, the two have reached a somewhat critical situation from which they cannot emerge without each other. *Philosophy* itself has reached a point where it has no chance of advancing when, in fact, any attempt to advance leads only to plunging into a bottomless abyss. We must thus step forward *towards a new cooperation of the two*, without repeating Hegel's errors. Rosenzweig thus places *revelation* in the midst of the horizons from

which both *philosophy* and *theology* are nourished, and the hopes for the revitalization of theology and philosophy are linked to the restoration of revelation. As practiced by the theologian, *philosophy* thus becomes a prognosis of revelation, in other words, it becomes *the Old Testament of Theology*, in the new cooperation between the two, with *the relation to truth* being of essential importance. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) regarded philosophy, especially after he wrote his famous work *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as the spiritual form that best accounts for the historical course of the unfolding of the absolute spirit and considered religion as a moment absorbed by philosophy (Marga, 2014, pp. 28-29).

Romanian thinker and professor Andrei Marga has formulated a thesis on the current relationship between science, philosophy and religion. According to this thesis, a pluralism of approaches to the world must be unreservedly acknowledged. Science, philosophy, and religion are, in fact, irreducible and autonomous; nevertheless, they must interact, for only such interaction can provide the cultural means to address the difficulties that have emerged in late modernity (Marga, 2008, pp. 500–501). The continuous dialogue among science, philosophy, and theology thus becomes imperative, as both the pathologies of reason and the pathologies of religion are recognized (Marga, 2015, pp. 298–299). According to the second thesis of Professor Andrei Marga, the traditional formulas of Tertullian—*credo quia absurdum*; Thomas Aquinas—*intelligo ut credam*; and Anselm of Canterbury—*credo ut intelligam*—are no longer viable. Likewise, the era of Kant's model—philosophy as a tribunal of knowledge is over.

Regarding the relationship between religion and philosophy, Professor Andrei Marga points out that we are now faced with a crucial choice in a new cultural configuration (Marga, 2012, p. 181). On the one hand, any attempt to reestablish religious control over all aspects of people's lives, including political affiliations, has proved unsuccessful, has brought tragedy and has always had to be regretted. The differentiation and autonomy of values—so convincingly described by Max Weber, Parsons and Luhmann—have no viable alternative in modern society. Nor can religion achieve its purpose unless it recognizes the differentiation and autonomy of values. On the other hand, try as they might, the sciences have not been able to establish morality, and philosophy has proved incapable of overcoming the crisis of motivation in today's democracies. The situation is such that we are obliged today to take stock of cultural resources and to evaluate a relatively long history—that of secularization (Rotaru, 2006, pp. 251-266). All indicators show that the "servant" paradigm in the relationship between religion and philosophy, which dominated the intellectual evolution of Europe from Tertullian, through Thomas Aquinas and Kant, Hegel and Auguste Comte, has gone against the grain of history and needs to be replaced by the "parallel" paradigm of religion and philosophy

The "parallelity" of the approaches of religion and philosophy presupposes that three preconditions are satisfied: philosophy ceases to ignore the research of theologians, as Rudolf Carnap demanded; theology ceases to ignore the research of philosophers, as Karl Barth demanded; philosophy and theology cease to approach each other in terms of truth/falsehood, as Kant demanded. "Parallelity" also presupposes, of course, that philosophy and theology cooperate in defending the firm values of the culture in which we live in Europe. Clearly, the relativisms of recent decades—stimulated more recently by biotechnologies and the dissolution of the family—have made it problematic to answer questions about the meaning of life, the difference between having a body and existing as a body, the meaning of human life. In this field, where the harmful consequences of relativism are spreading, a comprehensive action to defend and reaffirm firm values, through the cooperation of theologians and philosophers, is all the more necessary and urgent (Marga, 2012, p. 181).

A point of view has been formulated in recent Romanian philosophical literature by Prof. Dr. Gabriela Pohoanță, who argues that anyone claiming philosophy distances man from God commits a serious error due to confusions or prejudices that may still persist (Pohoanță, 2018, p. 129). Therefore, proposing to clarify this relationship towards a correct understanding of philosophy as a specific form of knowledge distinct from science, art, religion, he emphasized that philosophy does not harm man, on the contrary, it prepares his soul for what is to come. Philosophy is a prayer that you murmur all your life.

The aim of philosophical knowledge is that man, through the right use of reason, reaches a higher level of consciousness, thus being able to reach the knowledge of the essence of being, actualizing only what is divine in him. Philosophy as an eminently spiritual activity leads man towards true contemplation, acquiring an awareness of transcendence. At this level, philosophy appears as the supreme form of self-consciousness (Rotaru, 2005b, pp. 23-38). In philosophy, God is a primordial concept with metaphysical, epistemological, and moral meanings, approached either as a principle of existence or knowledge, or as the judge of consciousness, as an "absolute monarch". Philosophy itself is about transcendence, divinity (Pohoanță, 2018, p. 129). Religion has always been the rival of philosophy. We are referring here to religion in its literal sense, meaning the "covenant" between God and humanity, "revelation," "salvation," to which we can add "liturgy." The rivalry between religion and philosophy is at the level of ultimate options for visions, but concretely, there has been and can always be cooperation (Marga, 2021). The pressing need for clarification of the relationship between religion and philosophy is evident from the fact that two recently published monumental works of philosophy have it at their center. These are Heidegger's *Schwarze Hefte* (2014-2021) and Habermas's *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (2019), which are the very poles of the current discussion. Heidegger wanted to

shed light on the destiny of "Western culture" and to set it on a new course, in a situation which he calls "uprooting". He confronted the components he saw at the root of the "uprooting": Judaism, Christianity, democratism, Americanism, communism, and modern technicalism. He is not reconciled with any of them, and his vision aims to replace them at their roots, and the root is the Bible. Heidegger most clearly represents in modern culture the desire to create an alternative to the Bible. He considered, in his final interview in 1976, that "*Nur ein Gott kann uns retten*" ("Only a God can save us"), but he had a new "God" in mind. He expressed this idea, in a way, when he speculated on his own name in the *Black Notebooks*: "*Heid-egger: one who, heathen (Heide), encounters an uncultivated field and a harrow. But the harrow must for a long time let a plow go forward through stony fields.*" The *Black Notebooks* contain various indications of Heideggerian "paganism." Today it cannot be said that there are no gods among men—they are still numerous. Will, money, power, entertainment and others are among them. What is increasingly being seen with the naked eye and experienced, sometimes dramatically, is that we may have gods, but with them come narrow views. Heidegger did not take into account the circumstance that from narrow optics to the whole of life is a distance and that only God makes it possible to approach the human whole. In fact, it was from such an approach to the world that economics, freedoms, methodical research, reflexivity and, with them, modern society came (Marga, 2021).

Habermas rightly recaptured the original relationship between "knowledge" (Wissen) and "belief" (Glaube) and viewed the history of philosophy through its prism. Philosophy continued the discourse of the relationship between "faith" and "knowledge" even in the most lay formulations, and Hegel linked morality, which had become the focus of his predecessors, with history, culture and society. He created the ground for the intercalation, in the relation between subject and object of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, of the communication of socialized individuals. Habermas brings the analysis down to the actuality of life today. Three convictions are elaborated in detail in *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*. The first is that modernity will not solve its problems without "legitimation", "democratic rule of law" and "deliberative democracy". The second is that "modernity derails if the spontaneity of world-projecting reason dries up (*versiegt*) in a transcendence from within. The third concerns the interpretation of 'reason' (*vernunft*). Habermas acknowledges: "My attempt to give a genealogy of postmetaphysical thought must encourage us to conceive of man, as before, as *animal possessing reason* and to stick to a comprehensive concept of reason." Such a concept means that philosophy no longer remains "spinning the thread of interiority", but a living response to the challenges of knowledge and the needs of social integration.

Professor Andrei Marga thus formulates a new thesis according to which using the real difference between philosophy and religion as a pretext for

antagonizing them and ignoring the chances of cooperation between them does neither of them any good. Neither Karl Barth, who asked theologians to leave philosophy to its own devices, nor Rudolf Carnap, who postulated that philosophy and theology fall outside the sphere of meaningful propositions, meet our needs today. Only their working together is beneficial.

According to the Protestant theologian Millard J. Erickson (b. 1932) in his *Treatise on Christian Theology* (Erickson, 2020, pp. 38-40), the relationship between theology and philosophy has taken different forms. The first form has been that of a complete separation, that is, theology has delimited itself from philosophy. This attitude was manifested from the time of Tertullian (circa 160-230 AD). This attitude implies that philosophy has nothing to offer Christian theology. In fact, the two have such different aims that the Christian is advised to avoid contact and dialogue with philosophy altogether. Faith arises not because of the support of philosophy or other sources, but in fact in spite of the contribution of these disciplines. This view also appeared in the Middle Ages in the thought of the followers of Averroes, who preached a concept of double truth: namely, that the truth of theology and the truth of philosophy are totally different and separate. In reaction against the scholastic Catholic philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther was also inclined to reject philosophy. In his work *Table-Talk*, he states, "Let philosophy remain within its limits, as God has ordained, and let us make use of it as a character in a comedy."

The second attitude that emerged historically was that of Augustine (354 - 430), who believed that theology can be elucidated with the help of philosophy. He emphasized the primacy of faith and the acceptance of biblical revelation, but also insisted that philosophy can help us better understand our Christian theology. Augustine adopted Plato's philosophy, finding in it a vehicle for theology. For example, he was of the view that Christian metaphysics, with its conception of the supernatural world of God and the created world derived from and dependent upon it, could be better understood with the help of Plato's imagery of the dividing line. On one side are the unseen ideas, which are more real than the perceptible objects on the other side. The perceptible objects are but shadows cast by these Ideas. The Platonic theory of knowledge was also adapted to Augustine's theology (Rotaru, 2014, pp. 340-346). Plato taught that all the knowledge we have is really about pure Ideas or Forms. In a pre-existent state our soul was in contact with these Ideas (the idea of whiteness, truth, seat, etc.), enabling us to recognize these qualities in particular sensible objects in the present. Augustine adapted this part of the Platonic philosophy to his own doctrine of illumination: the light that illumines every man who comes into the world (John 1:9) is God who impresses Forms on the human intellect (Rotaru, 2007, pp. 139-158).

Philosophy sometimes gives rise to theology. As Christian theology began to encounter paganism and non-Christian religions, it became necessary to find a

neutral basis on which to found the truth of the divinely authoritative message. Thomas Aquinas found such a basis in Aristotle's arguments for the existence of God. In this context, philosophy contributed to the credibility of theology. Moreover, Aristotle's metaphysics of substance and accident provided the conceptual foundation for key doctrinal formulations, such as the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Theology can be judged by philosophy. From the position that theology can be validated by philosophy came the logical conclusion that theology must be validated by philosophy in order to be accepted. Deism decided to accept only those basic principles of religion that could be verified and demonstrated by reason. In some cases philosophy even provides content for theology. Hegel, for example, interpreted Christianity in terms of his own idealist philosophy. The result was an entirely rationalized version of Christianity. He saw the truths of Christianity as merely variants of a universal truth, a dialectical pattern that history follows. Take the Trinity, for example: through pure abstract thought, God is the Father; transforming Himself forever into a finite being, He is the Holy Spirit. Because the doctrines of Christianity fit the triadic pattern of all history (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), their truths are established and guaranteed, but in the form of universal truths, rather than specific realities. Thus the understanding of Christianity has been altered, as its content has been adjusted to a philosophy believed to be true (Erickson, 2020, pp. 38-40). As a reflection on the experience of faith, theology rather quickly came up against philosophy as a rival, which also claimed to preach a message about human existence. When St. Paul proposed to the Greeks to baptize their culture, he failed. Paul preached the "wisdom of the cross"—a scandal to the Jews, supported by their Scriptures, and folly to the pagans, who preferred their philosophical evidences (Neusch & Chenu, 2019, p. 12).

Two currents have run through Christianity, one hostile to philosophy, the other supportive of it. The first does not want to recognize Jesus Christ: it will not know how to seek the truth elsewhere than in the Gospel. This refusal, which is often the mark of deeply spiritual people, runs through *The Imitation of Jesus Christ*. This fifteenth-century bestseller of Christian piety urges readers to turn away from the uncertain paths of philosophy and to be instructed by truth itself. This tradition persists in Protestantism. From Martin Luther (1483-1546) to Karl Barth (1886-1968), it has maintained a reserve towards philosophy, often very nuanced. Immanuel Kant, influenced by both pietism and positivism, expressed this stance in classical terms, later popularized by Maurice Clavel. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) has lapidary formulas to reject any human right before God: "the mouth of reason must be shut by force, by discipline, by the threat of eternal punishment." On the Catholic side, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) remains a typical representative of the intransigence of faith. Resisting all worldly apologetics, he rejects all proof: "it is the cross that makes us believe!"

Another current that developed within Christianity tried to harmonize the "Greek testament" (philosophy) and the testament left by Jesus Christ. This effort can be justified by a very ancient tradition. St. Justin (c. 100-1655), a pagan philosopher who converted to Christianity, placed all his philosophical skills at the service of faith. Over the centuries, theologians opened the doors to philosophy. They multiplied these "baptisms," the most famous being of Plato through St. Augustine, and Aristotle through St. Thomas Aquinas—not to mention the more recent "baptisms" of Descartes, Kant and Heidegger. This trend has been favored by the Catholic Church, which has made philosophy an important part of its teaching (Rotaru, 2005c, pp. 93-102).

By appealing to theology, which removes all autonomy, philosophy felt alienated. The Middle Ages were marked by revolts against this warning. In the 18th century, philosophy took its true revenge and reclaimed its central role. From a servant, subject to the will of theology, it proclaimed its independence. Moreover, it turned itself into a judge and henceforth closed theology into the obscurantism of obscurantism (Neusch & Chenu, 2019, p. 13). If Hegel (1770-1831) made the most impressive effort of modern times to restore to faith the right to the word, even in the name of reason, his attempt to reconcile philosophy and theology was to no avail. Emancipated, philosophy made its own way, refusing any theological alliances, removing any remnant of the old heritage (which led to the birth of a hybrid: onto-theology, which Heidegger accused it of), refusing any theological influence that it might provoke.

Philosophy and theology are separate planets: to live on one is to deny yourself access to the other. This is the meaning of Husserl's (1859-1938) irony: "I have a Gospel on my table, but I never open it, because if I did, I would stop doing philosophy." Philosophy has to take the risk of "questioning to the end" without listening to the Christian answer. This independence can become a richness for theology. New horizons open up and challenge it to new beginnings. For theology, it is neither a question of rejecting everything en bloc, nor of adhering to everything, as in the case of some theologians who cannot adapt to modernity.

This attempt at inculturation also entails the risk of dissipation. First of all, theology is not faced with a single philosophy, but with a kind of "many-headed monster, each speaking its own language" (Schopenhauer). Moreover, other disciplines have emerged with new methods (anthropology, linguistics, etc.). They all claim to be candidates for the succession to the reigning science. If theology wishes to remain open to dialogue, it must become more forgiving, to break away from its all too easily acquired certainties and be ready to receive and at the same time to give. With hermeneutics, it reteaches us how to read the Word of God; with the humanities, it discovers dimensions undreamed of. It must be open to difference (Neusch & Chenu, 2019, p. 14). It is an uncomfortable situation, where she is no longer in a dominant position, nor in a

position to bring any more wild thinking into her pen. It itself appears as one interpretation among others, competing with itself and showing just as much coherence.

Conclusions

We must realize, with Nietzsche, that the world has once again become infinite, open to an infinity of interpretations, none of which has the privilege of totality. It is, as he notes, "ridiculous claim to decree that our little corner is the singular point that confers the right to a perspective". A certain modesty is a necessary condition for any dialogue. Yet theology would betray its vocation if it remained silent and accepted the equivalence of all perspectives. Its mission is twofold: critical and transformative, without threatening the autonomy of other disciplines. As a critical discipline, theology must discern, in all forms of human reflection, those limits that signal a mutilation of the human being. It should, therefore, cultivate those openings that allow it to move beyond such limits. At its foundation, theology's mission is to open up human space to God and to undertake an "effective take-off", giving God His true name in Jesus Christ (Rotaru, 2005a, pp. 295-324). The task of theology is always to live in tension, forming with philosophy "the two arms of the cross" (Pradines). Its authenticity, however, will depend less on the answers it will be able to give than on the questions it will be able to ask.

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