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Aquinas and Heidegger on the Relationship between Philosophy and Theology

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The relationship that obtains between philosophy and Christian theology has been variously understood, both from within the Church and from outside of the Church, for the greater part of the Church's historical existence. Often enough there has simply been denial that a relationship exists between Western philosophy, divine revelation, and Christian theological reflection upon revelation. One thinks immediately of Tertullian's rhetorical question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[1] One thinks also of Émile Bréhier's charge, early in the twentieth century, that philosophy had been so denatured by Christian dogma in the medieval period that philosophy was not possible again until the time of Descartes in the seventeenth century.[2]

St. Thomas Aquinas, for his part, would distinguish philosophy and theology precisely in order to unite them in the form of a *hendiadys* or differentiated unity. For St. Thomas, philosophy and theology are related to one another precisely on account of their insurmountable difference from one another. They are related to one another because they are heterogeneously structured with respect to one another. The heterogeneous character of philosophy and theology arises out of the irreducibly different manner in which the two sciences are related to God. The two sciences are not differentiated from one another on a common field of play, so to speak. Philosophy arises out of human questioning. Theology, on the other hand, is only possible to the degree that God chooses to reveal

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[1] Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, 7, 9.
[2] See Avery Dulles, "Can Philosophy Be Christian," *First Things* 102 (April, 2000): 24–9.

himself to man.

In the Twentieth Century, the philosophical and theological work of Hans Urs von Balthasar recovers this basic Thomistic insight into the nature of the relationship of philosophy and theology in the context of the struggle between philosophy and theology that takes place within the tradition of German Idealism. In light of the general contemporary forgetfulness of the Thomistic understanding of the nature of the relationship that obtains between philosophy and theology, the contribution made by Hans Urs von Balthasar to the revival of an essentially Thomistic understanding of the heterogeneity of philosophy and theology–which alone guarantees the proper relationship between them–is itself a philosophical achievement of great importance.

The Balthasarian overcoming of the conflation of philosophy and theology in German Idealism holds great promise for helping both contemporary philosophers and contemporary theologians to find a way to properly distinguish their respective sciences from one another in order properly to relate them once again. Hans Urs von Balthasar is indeed a philosopher as well as a theologian. His work not only accomplishes a retrieval of the Thomistic understanding of the relationship of philosophy and theology, but also accomplishes this retrieval in a manner that permits a real dialogue on the issue to take place between post-modern Thomism and post-modern Continental thought.

Balthasar's thought paves the way for much of the late twentieth-century philosophical work that would seek to save reason from itself, so to speak, by distinguishing "reason" from "secular reason," which is a relative latecomer to the Western philosophical tradition. Balthasar himself also seeks to overcome "secular reason," although not by claiming that reason is simply "faith seeking understanding."[3] Rather, he maintains the traditional relation-in-distinction between faith and reason. Such a distinction alone, however, suffices to keep reason united to faith in a way that, nonetheless, permits both faith and reason to retain their proper integrity and autonomy. When reason is again understood in terms of its natural *telos*, a fulfillment in faith that neither violates reason's own structure nor proves attainable by unaided reason alone, faith and reason are able to be related anew in a manner that preserves their respective modes of

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[3] This claim is generally held in common by the leading thinkers of the "Radical Orthodoxy" movement, John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock. Both of these philosophical theologians acknowledge their debt to Balthasar as one of their sources of inspiration in the task of "overcoming secular reason," which has dominated Western philosophical and theological thought since at least the time of the "Enlightenment."

ontological wholeness and the phenomenologically singular manner of their mutual co-givenness.

I will offer a very incomplete outline of the positions of Aquinas and of Heidegger, from both of whom Balthasar is able to draw in a manner that is at once both sympathetic and critical. I will conclude that Balthasar provides a model for a "post-'postmodern'" philosophy that is able all at once to operate phenomenologically, ontologically, and hermeneutically.

Aquinas on the Relationship of Philosophy and Theology

St. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes philosophy and theology in order to unite them. For St. Thomas, philosophy and theology are intimately related to one another precisely because they are irreducibly different from each other. The heterogeneous character of philosophy and theology with respect to one another arises out of the irreducibly different manner in which the two sciences are related to God. The two sciences are not differentiated from one another as if they were two symmetrically related (and therefore at least potentially dialectical) terms. If the relationship between philosophy and theology were symmetrical and dialectical, then both philosophy and theology would be sublated into one another in order to constitute a "whole" that neither science could constitute by itself. The Thomistic understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology, however, permits no such conflation for the sake of the inauguration of a new epistemological whole that would be greater than the sum of its constituent "parts.

Thomas, therefore, distinguishes philosophy, in particular, metaphysics, from theology precisely in order to relate them in a manner that seeks to denature neither of them.[4] As John Wippel observes, "For Thomas theology or divine science is twofold." On the one hand, there is "a theology in which divine things are considered not as the subject of the science, but rather as the principle or cause of the subject. This is metaphysics or natural theology and has as its subject *ens in quantum est ens*." Such a "natural theology" studies God "only as principle or cause of … that which falls under its subject–being as being." "Sacred theology," on the other hand, "considers divine things in their own right as its subject." Based on Scripture, "this theology differs in genus from natural theology

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[4] This might well be closer than is usually thought to the position of Heidegger. See Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology," trans. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo, in *Pathways*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 41: "Theology is a positive science and as such is absolutely different from philosophy."

or metaphysics."[5]

"Natural" and "sacred" theology, therefore, differ generically and in an insurmountably non-conflatable and non-dialectical manner. From the Thomistic perspective, there is no possibility of there being a dialectical relationship between the "natural theology" that considers "the God of reason" as source and principle of its subject–being as being–and the "sacred theology" that has "the God of Faith" for its subject.[6] It is important to realize that for St. Thomas, it is not the case that metaphysics has for its subject "the God of reason" and that *sacra doctrina* has for its subject "the God of faith." For St. Thomas, rather, metaphysics could no more have "the God of reason" for its subject that it could have as its subject "the God of faith." Once the relationship between the world and God is understood as the relationship between "creation" and "Creator," there is precluded in principle any possibility of taking God as the subject of a human science, the first principles of which are the laws of identity, difference, and contradiction.[7]

Why must it be the case that not even "the God of reason" can be the subject of metaphysics for St. Thomas? Such must be the case because of what Robert Sokolowski calls "the Christian Distinction" between the world and God, a distinction that is made from within the Christian perspective once the world is understood as created and God is understood to be its Creator.[8] "The Christian Distinction" is a new kind of philosophical distinction, one that is articulated in the light of a theological datum. The Christian Distinction between God and the world, therefore, does in fact make possible a "Christian philosophy" of a very specific sort. As Wipple points out, following Pegis, philosophy can be at once *both* philosophy *and* Christian because these two terms are united only on the basis of their remaining distinguished. "Christian philosophy" is *philosophy* as long as it is "a work of human reason operating according to its proper light." Such a "Christian philosophy" is *Christian* once human reason freely embarks on the development of the insights into the structure of worldly being that it has

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[5] John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 18, n. 9. Here Wippel cites Thomas's *Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 4.

[6] See Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (South Bend: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), ix, xiii.

[7] Such is not the case for Duns Scotus, for whom God can in a certain sense be the subject of metaphysics, once the conceptual univocity of Being is established. But even for Scotus, God is not the subject of metaphysics in the way that "matter in motion" is the subject of Aristotelian physics.

[8] Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 23.

achieved under the influence of revelation.[9]

As long as what is Christian and what is philosophical are distinguished before they are related, there can be a "Christian philosophy" in the sense that a philosopher can be motivated by his prior Christian belief either to accept or to explore certain propositions concerning the structure of human and worldly reality. The philosopher's philosophy is therefore Christian philosophy only in "the moment of discovery" relative to this or that insight achieved by human reason in the light of Christian faith.[10] There is no such thing as "Christian philosophy," however, in terms of philosophy's "moment of proof." Although a philosopher might articulate certain premises that are graspable by reason operating within the light of revelation, the Christian philosopher could not directly admit a revealed premise into the philosophical demonstration of a given conclusion and still maintain that he was doing philosophy rather than theology.[11]

The theological datum is, of course, the revealed truth that everything that is not God is created by God *ex nihilo*. The philosophical distinction between God and the world that arises on the foundation of this theological datum is that God can no longer be understood simply as the topmost dimension of the world-whole. Rather, we must deny that God is a "part" of the created world-whole at all.

The god of Aristotle cannot be conceived except as intrinsically and necessarily related to the world-whole, with respect to which the god is the final cause of motion and change in things that change and move. The Christian Creator God, on the other hand, while also understood as the final cause of everything other than himself, is no longer a mere final cause of change and motion. The Creator God is rather the ultimate cause and principle of the fact that there exists anything other than God at all. The Creator God both can and must be conceived as essentially without any relationship of dependence upon the world-whole, which for its part radically depends upon him. God *is*, quite independently of whether or not he elects to create anything at all.[12]

Saint Anselm's understanding of God as "that than which nothing greater can be thought" well serves to illustrate the implications of the Christian Distinction between the world and God. Saint Anselm's formula is expressive of the following state of affairs: "God plus the world is not greater than God

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[9] Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes*, 22–3.

[10] Ibid., 23.

[11] Ibid., 23–4.

[12] Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 8–10.

alone."[13] The Creator God cannot be added to or subtracted from. While anything other than God that happens to exist depends radically on God, God depends on nothing in order both to be and to appear for himself as being all that he is and can be. The fact that there happen to be created *beings* in no way generates an increase in divine *Being*. The Creator God alone is ontologically *selbständig* in an absolute manner. God can safely be spoken of as *esse subsistens* because we recognize that while any created thing that exists is similar to God in so far as it exists, God himself, as *esse subsistens*, is radically dissimilar to all created things.

Insofar as we can predicate anything at all of God, therefore, we can do so only in a halting and indirect manner by means of the threefold movement of affirmation, negation, and eminence. God is related to the world otherwise than in a real relation of dependence upon the world. The world-whole and God are thus related analogically. The world-whole and God are mutually related to one another. The mutuality and reciprocity of this relationship, however, is radically assymetrical in structure. All created things are *like* God only in the humanly insurmountable interval of God's radical *unlikeness* to created things. It is precisely in light of Aquinas's own recognition of the philosophical and theological ramifications of "the Christian Distinction" between the world and God that he can and must deny that "the God of reason"–whose existence is affirmed on the basis of the twofold recognition that "everything that is moved is moved by another" and that there cannot be an indefinite regress of "moved movers" (especially when God is understood in light of faith to be the Creator)–can ever be the *subject* of even the highest of the human sciences. It is possible that Aquinas's understanding of the insurmountable difference that must obtain between philosophy and theology might at least appear less distant from Heidegger's statement, once that statement is understood in its own proper and much fuller context, namely, the essay entitled "Phenomenology and Theology."[14]

Martin Heidegger's Understanding of the Relationship between Reason and Faith

Heidegger's statement, "there is no such thing as a Christian philosophy; that is an absolute 'square circle',"[15] would at least seem to situate him on the side of Bréhier against Aquinas. But perhaps Heidegger and Aquinas are more closely in

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[13] Ibid., 8.

[14] Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology," 39–62.

[15] Ibid., 53.

agreement than they might at first appear to be, thanks to the mediating hermeneutical activity of Balthasar. According to Heidegger, what is given for Christian theology is not so much God as it is "Christianness" itself, a particular horizon by means of which worldly and human reality can be interpreted in a Christian manner.[16] Heidegger's "Christianness," furthermore, is not only an epistemological horizon but is also a historical "destiny." The "how" of the disclosure of this destiny is what Heidegger calls *faith*.

Heidegger's manner of distinguishing between Christian faith and Christian theology is different from that of St. Thomas, and so there will be some real difference between the two in terms of distinguishing and relating theology and philosophy. But it is at least possible that this difference is not an insurmountable one. Heidegger understands Christian theology as being constituted "in thematizing faith and that which is disclosed through faith, that which is 'revealed.'" In this manner, faith itself also becomes a theme for theology. Theology is "an interpretive science of Christianness" that is both motivated by faith and that in the end has faith itself as its most proper theme.[17]

At least on the surface, such an understanding of theology seems close to that of Sokolowski: "The primary task of Christian theology is to clarify how the God we believe in is to be understood."[18] The striking similarity between the two formulations would seem to reside in the phenomenological character of the thought of both Heidegger and Sokolowski. The phenomenological method is certainly intended to be at the service of the manner(s) and manifold(s) of disclosure or manifestation through which things are given in order to appear as themselves. Sokolowski, like Balthasar, maintains the distinction between philosophy and theology in order also to articulate the asymmetrically reciprocal manner in which the two sciences are related. Sokolowski works to show, on the basis of the Christian Distinction, that "natural necessities" disclose themselves to human reason "with their own evidence" such that they retain their own proper integrity and intelligibility even when they are "resituated," so to speak, in order to be understood in a theological context.[19] Sokolowski writes, "if the Christian Distinction is correctly appreciated and correctly lived, then the cultural forms in which it is realized, the habits, music, language, gestures, work, and social order, the nuances of moral life and of human relationships, can be brought forward in

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[16] Ibid., 43–4.

[17] Ibid., 45.

[18] Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 1.

[19] Ibid., 53.

their own excellence and still be in the service of the Christian faith."[20]

Sokolowski's position relative to the relationship of philosophy and theology, similar as it is to both that of Aquinas and of Balthasar, permits us to see that the Balthasarian discussion of the issue might go some distance in addressing the legitimate concerns of Heidegger, even as it might go some distance in correcting and completing some other, more problematic Heideggerian pronouncements on the question.

For Heidegger, in any case, faith, "that which is believed," is not so much intellectual assent to a "coherent order of propositions." Faith is rather a particular manner of "being-in-the-world," what Heidegger calls "the very comportment of believing, of faithfulness–in each case a revealed faithfulness, which cannot possibly be any other way." And this means for Heidegger that faith, understood as "the comportment of believing, is itself believed, itself belongs to that which is believed."[21] Christian faith–"the existing relation to the Crucified"–is "a mode of historical Dasein, of human existence, of historically being in a history that discloses itself only in and for faith." Christian faith is therefore "an intrinsically *historical* mode of being," such that theology is "to the very core a *historical* science."[22]

In saying that Christian theology is an intrinsically historical science, however, Heidegger does not deny that it is also a *systematic* science.[23] Theology is not, however, systematic in an "analytic" manner. It does not first break up the totality of the content of faith into so many "*loci*" that it would then attempt to reunite in a synthetic and artificially constructed manner in order to prove "the validity of the system."[24] Theology is rather "a conceptual interpretation of Christian existence," which itself is "the specific mode of the being of the Christian occurrence" such as it is testified to in Scripture.[25] "Christian things" and "the Christian occurrence" are given for us only in a specific mode of the historical being of Dasein. Scripture itself is an expression of Christian existence. Scripture is a differentiated unity of orality and writing that gives "the Christian occurrence" in a necessarily mediated manner, via the praxis and comportment proper to historically lived Christian existence. For us, there neither is nor can be

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[20] Ibid., 48.
[21] Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology," 45–6.
[22] Ibid., 46.
[23] Ibid., 47.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

a direct and unmediated disclosure of the Christian occurrence. This is given to us, much as we are given to ourselves, through the mediation of history, orality, and writing.

Christian theology, therefore, is systematic precisely in recognizing that the Christian occurrence is not and cannot be given *as a system*. Christian theology is systematic, "not by constructing a system, but on the contrary by *avoiding* a system, in the sense that it seeks solely to bring to light the instrinsic σῦστήμά of the Christian occurrence as such, that is, to place the believer who understands conceptually into the history of revelation."[26]

Heidegger goes on to say that Christian systematic theology will more fully accomplish its task to the degree that it permits "its concepts and conceptual schemes … [to] be determined by the mode of being and the specific substantive content of *that* entity which it objectifies."[27] Theology must avoid interpreting the "Christian phenomena" by means of a presupposed philosophical system that would necessarily have its origins elsewhere than in the New Testament itself. "The more unequivocally theology disburdens itself of the application of some philosophy and its system, the more *philosophical* is its own radical scientific character."[28] Theology can be itself only insofar as its "object" is that which is given by revelation itself, rather than an interpretive philosophical lens through which it would force the "Christian phenomena" to pass in order to appear. Once theology attempts to be phenomenologically presuppositionless in this manner, allowing that which appears to give itself such as it gives itself, theology can then employ philosophy and its methods to help to articulate conceptually that which it lives and sees existentially. Although *faith* does not need philosophy, the "*science* of faith as a *positive* science" does require recourse to philosophy.[29]

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[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 47–8.
[28] Ibid., 48.
[29] Ibid., 50.