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Xavier Tilliette on Revelation as the Measure of Reason: Toward a Christological Philosophy

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Xavier Tilliette, born in Sommes, France in 1921, passed away on 10 December 2018 at the age of 97.¹ Although he first gained notoriety for his many studies of

¹ As a teenager, Tilliette joined the Society of Jesus as a novice in 1938 and became a priest around age 30 in 1951. Academically, he received a degree in Philosophy, Theology, and Classical Arts in Grenoble in 1943 and a second degree in German in Lyons in 1946. The following year he was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the Jesuit School St. Louis de Gonzague in Paris, where he taught Phenomenology, Modern and Contemporary Philosophy from 1947–1949 and 1954–1957, with these appointments sandwiching his initiation into the priesthood. Beginning in 1961 and ending in 1966, he also taught at the Studium Theologicum in Chantilly near Paris as well as at the Jesuit Centre Sèvres in Paris. Only in 1969, in his late 40s, did he obtain a PhD in Philosophy from the Sorbonne. In 1993 he was also awarded a PhD in Theology *honoris causa* in Naples. His dissertation, approaching 1,200 pages in length, was on F.W.J. Schelling and was published as two volumes a year later with the title *Schelling: une philosophie en devenir* [*Schelling: A Philosophy in Becoming*]. This immediately made him the preeminent Schelling scholar in France, with Jean Louis Viellard-Baron even deeming him “the most significant Schelling specialist in the world” (“Die Christologie der Ungläubigen. Vom romantischen Jesus zur Spiritualität im Gegenwartsroman,” in *Vernunft und Glauben: ein philosophischer Dialog der Moderne mit dem Christentum*, ed. Steffen Dietzsch & Gian Franco Frigo (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006), 72). In 1969, the same year he received his PhD, he became Chair of History of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy, a post he held until 1987, at the Institut Catholique of Paris. During this time and later, 1972–2000, he also held a Professorship in the Faculty of Philosophy at the Pontifical Gregorian University of Rome. He was eventually granted Emeritus status at both these institutions. It is additionally worth mentioning that he held numerous posts as a Visiting Professor in Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal and the USA. Concerning lifetime achievements, he has received multiple awards, e.g., the Prix de l’Académie Française, the Humboldt Medal, an award from the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften and an award from the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques. Three academic volumes have been collected in his honor, the first in Italy, the second in Germany and the third in France. Finally, he served as a consultant for the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*.

Schelling,² he has also published numerous books and articles on other figures in philosophy and theology, e.g., Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, G.W.F. Hegel, Maurice Blondel, Paul Claudel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gabriel Marcel, Jules Lequier, Henri de Lubac and Vladimir Jankélévitch, amongst others.³

Apart from his work on Schelling, Tilliette may best be known for his work on philosophical Christology,⁴ which means that he has much to say about the relation between theology and philosophy as well as between faith and reason. It is surely for this reason that he was selected as one of the consultants for the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*.

This study—the first of a two—which will hopefully spark an interest in Tilliette’s thought for English-speaking thinkers—will critically reflect upon what Tilliette has to say about the relation between (1) revelation and history (and thus between eternity and time), and (2) faith and reason (and thus between theology and philosophy). Concerning the latter pairing, it is, for Tilliette, not primarily a question of how faith might be demonstrated or, more humbly, simply explicated philosophically, i.e., through reason, whereby faith would be passive and reason active, but it is rather a question of how revelation can act upon reason, which would now be the one playing the role of passive handmaiden. More precisely, how can revelation, by which Tilliette principally means the incarnation of the Messiah, expand the borders of philosophy? To speak Schellingian, how does revelation bring about an ‘ekstasis of reason?’ The aim, however, is not to proselytize, but merely to show how the purview of reason can be enlarged and the borders of philosophy expanded by means of ‘theological givens.’ The operative assumption is thus that the domain of reason alone is too narrow to speak of the empirical, i.e., of ‘facts,’ religious or

² In addition to his dissertation—*Schelling: une philosophie en devenir* [*Schelling: A Philosophy in Becoming*] (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1992)—Tilliette also published three other books on Schelling: (1) *La mythologie comprise: l’interprétation-Schellingienne du paganisme*. [*Mythology Understood: The Schellingian Interpretation of Paganism*] (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2002), (2) *Une introduction à Schelling* [*An Introduction to Schelling*] (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007) and (3) *Schelling: Biographie* [*Schelling: A Biography*] (Calmann-Lévy; 1999) as well as a number of articles. None of the books have been translated into English.

³ All told, Tilliette’s academic publications exceed 2,000 in number with some of these, early in his career, even being on cinema, as he served as a film critic.

⁴ Tilliette published four books on philosophical Christology: *La christologie idéaliste* [Idealist Christology] (Paris: Desclée, 1986); *Le Christ de la philosophie: Prolegomènes à une christologie philosophique* [The Christ of Philosophy: Prolegomena to a Philosophical Christology] (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1990); *Le Christ des philosophes: Du Maître de sagesse au divin témoin* [The Christ of Philosophers: From the Master of Wisdom to Divine Witness] (Namur: Culture et Vérité, 1993); *Qu’est-ce que la christologie philosophique?* [What is Philosophical Christology?] (Collège des Bernardins: Parole et Silence, 2013). The second, which is the most extensive treatment, was published in France in 1990, but was translated into German in 1998 as *Philosophische Christologie: Eine Hinführung* [*Philosophical Christology: An Introduction*], trans. Jörg Disse, (Freiburg i.B.: Johannes Verlag). While Tilliette’s work has garnered a fair degree of renown in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal, due to a lack of translations of any of his books into English, his work remains unknown and unmentioned upon in the Anglophone academic world. With respect to his work on philosophical Christology, this author is aware of only one relevant article that has been translated, “Trinity and Creation,” trans. Sarah Donahue, *Communio: International Catholic Review* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2001). There are, to my knowledge, no relevant pieces of secondary literature at all, though some articles are misleadingly published with English titles despite being composed in Italian.



otherwise, that could not possibly be known *a priori* and so can be known by no other means than ‘revelation.’ Specifically, it will be shown how the Messianic event, i.e., the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, can broaden academic borders, not just for theology but also for philosophy.

What Revelation Does to Philosophy

“The problem is not the following: how Christology must be depicted in order to satisfy the requirements of philosophy, but rather how philosophy has to present itself in order to correspond to the requirements of Christology.”⁵ If, as Tilliette here suggests, philosophy must adhere to dictates set by Christology, then it is because Christology does not merely offer philosophy some content about which to think, but, more than that, it alters philosophy: it delimits the claims philosophy can make and judges claims it already does make. Tilliette, always with concrete instances in mind, provides at least three ways in which revelation, i.e., the ‘fact’ of the Christ-event, exerts an active influence on philosophy: transubstantiation, free creation, and the interpenetration of time and eternity. It will be useful, however, first to explain what a fact is and how the Christ-event, which, to repeat, is always shorthand for the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, could be treated as a fact. In other words, an explanation of why revelation, *if* it is, is necessarily factual must first be offered.

“The simplest conceivable philosophical access to Jesus Christ, i.e., with the least pitfalls,” Tilliette confesses, “seems to be the acceptance of his historical existence, of his words and of his teaching.”⁶ This, however—the Messiah’s teachings and miracles, the words and deeds of the historical figure of Jesus—is decidedly *not* the revelatory fact, the fact of Jesus as *the Messiah*. Like the Apostle Paul, who has next to nothing to say about the so-called ‘historical Jesus,’ rather deigning to know nothing but “Christ crucified,” it is the personhood and *being* of Jesus that constitutes the fact of the revelation. The fact under question, then, does not primarily involve epistemological problems concerning historical knowledge, though these cannot be excluded, but it is a question concerning an *ontological* fact. In other words, it is an inner fact at least as much as it is a fact that requires external, historiographical, verification.

Appealing to the “masterful beginning”⁷ of Schelling’s *Darstellung des philosophischen Empirismus* [*Presentation of Philosophical Empiricism*], Tilliette proffers that

⁵ “Das Problem lautet nicht: wie muß sich die Christologie darstellen, um den Forderungen der Philosophie zu genügen, sondern wohl eher: wie hat sich die Philosophie zu präsentieren, um den Anforderungen der Christologie zu entsprechen.” Xavier Tilliette, “Ist eine philosophische Christologie möglich?,” in *Probleme und Aspekte der Fundamentaltheologie* (Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag, 1985), 169–187: 186.

⁶ “Der einfachste, mit den wenigsten Fallstricken versehene philosophische Zugang zu Jesus Christus, scheint die Annahme seiner historischen Existenz, seines Wortes und seiner Lehre zu sein.” “Ist,” 173.

⁷ Xavier Tilliette, “Die ‘höhere Geschichte,’” in *Schelling, seine Bedeutung für eine Philosophie der Natur und der Geschichte: Referate und Kolloquien der Internationalen Schelling-Tagung Zürich 1979*, ed. Ludwig Hasler (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1981), 193–204: 193.

“a fact is in no way something objectively present or superficial.”⁸ This does not mean that a fact cannot be objectively present, but objective presence is not that wherein its facticity lies. Facts—as Martin Heidegger similarly taught of ‘phenomena’—are hidden, principally because they exceed reason. A fact, in other words, is something that cannot possibly be known *a priori*, but only and insofar as it is ‘given,’ yet, as will be argued, givenness is equally irreducible to a sense datum, to the *a posteriori*. If the term ‘revelation’ might already be prematurely used to designate the givenness of the given, then a fact is something that can be known *only* if revealed. There is, for example, absolutely no possible knowledge of the fact of gravity apart from the falling of bodies. Subsequent to this sense-event, reason and speculation will enter the scene to posit a supersensible law or mechanism as well as its mathematical formulation to account for this given, but only, as it were, ‘after the fact.’ In short, reason always does its work too late to account for the facticity of a fact, i.e., its quoddity, although it can account for a thing’s quiddity and provide the mathematical formula correspondent to its operation. Rather than appeal to gravity, however, Tilliette follows Schelling’s example, that of a book.

Another analogy offers the simple presence of a book: paper and letters are echoes of the same; only understanding discloses the authentic work; the fact is spirit and thought. We are not accustomed to observe a book as a fact, but rather as a thing, but it depends on the intention: a fact is everywhere a puzzle that should first be developed before we can point to it.⁹

A fact (*Tatsache*) is neither the objective thing (*Ding*) nor the superficially positivistic, i.e., sensible, fact of the matter (*Sache*) because the matter (*Sache*) depends on something inner, like a free deed (*Tat*), hence a fact is a *Tat-sache* (the ‘act of the matter’). Said differently, all *factum* is based in *actum*. This is that to which Tilliette is alluding when he says that “it depends on the *intention*.” Intention (*Absicht* is not the same as intentionality) is always intention to will, intention to act, and only an act can account for a fact’s facticity, i.e., quoddity, while reason can only ever approach a fact’s essence or quiddity. Reason always proves insufficient in the face of facticity. Additionally, it should hopefully already be obvious why facts are not simply ‘things’ or ‘objects,’ lest there could be no such thing as, for example, political facts. In light of a political fact or before the fact that another has acted, one asks “What happened? What did I just see?” The (f)act of the matter is clearly not reducible to a sense datum. Tilliette confirms, “The external appearance is valid merely as a hint and indication.”¹⁰

⁸ Tilliette, “Höhere Geschichte,” 193.

⁹ “Eine andere Analogie bietet die einfache Gegenwart eines Buches: Papier und Buchstaben sind Schalle desselben, das authentische Werk eröffnet nur das Verständnis, die Tatsache ist Geist und Gedanke. Wir sind nicht gewohnt, ein Buch als eine Tatsache zu betrachten, eher als sein Ding, aber es kommt auf die Absicht an: die Tatsache ist überall ein Rätsel, die erst erschlossen werden soll, bevor wir auf sie hinweisen können.” Tilliette, “Höhere Geschichte,” 194.

¹⁰ “Die äußere Erscheinung gilt bloß als Wink und Hinweis.” Tilliette, “Höhere Geschichte,” 195.

This is just as, for Schelling, Tilliette observes, “Mythology is an inner, ‘ecstatic’ history ... that first passes over into actual history through a real fact [*wirkliches Faktum*], through the reception and birth of Christ.”¹¹ Schelling’s philosophy of mythology and his notion that a proper understanding of the history of mythology is a necessary prerequisite for a proper understanding of Christian revelation cannot here be discussed, but one can at least glean that Tilliette picks up on the notion that the relationship between *Tatsache*, which has to do with will and deed, and historical facticity involves the transition from inner or *eternal* history to time.

Drawing on rhetoric from Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Schelling sees that reason, only able to account for quiddity, has a negative function, while actual existence or facticity is the positive. On this basis he, as Tilliette elsewhere confirms, sketches “positive philosophy as a superior empiricism.”¹² It is safe to say that Tilliette borrows these notions from Schelling. If deeds, or at least divine deeds, are wrought in eternity but bear temporal, i.e., historical, effects, then a genuine empiricism that concerns itself with the facticity of facts, i.e., with the will (or principle) that brought them about, can speak of the supersensible and the eternal. Theology, then, which is concerned with a supersensible God who only acts eternally, yet effectuates salvation history within time, is a science of the fact; theology is an empirical science, a higher empiricism. Tilliette is always quick to acknowledge and privilege “the grandeur of the Fact, and singularly the Fact of Revelation, by which reality imposes itself and which would not be able to be anticipated *a priori*—and correlatively the impotence of rationalisms to bring themselves to the rank of the Fact.”¹³ Moreover, he holds that he does this to a higher degree than Schelling himself, remarking, “[Schelling] pretends to save the autonomy of philosophy. The same principles, in effect, hold sway over negative philosophy and positive philosophy.”¹⁴ If the same principles hold sway over both domains, then Tilliette’s suspicion is that Schelling still lets philosophy operate *too* autonomously, because the fact of revelation has obviously not caused any real alteration in the principles that are operative in negative, i.e., purely rational, philosophy. For Tilliette, however, reason does not merely receive its content from the fact, but reason is judged and altered by the fact.

To recapitulate:

- a. Facts are not knowable *a priori* but also, qua supersensible, not properly knowable *a posteriori*, i.e., as a mere sense datum. In this sense all facts are only

¹¹ “Die Mythologie ist eine innere, ‘ekstatische’ Geschichte ... die erst durch ein wirkliches Faktum, durch das Empfängnis und die Geburt Christi, in wirkliche Geschichte übergeht.” Tilliette, “Höhere Geschichte,” 199.

¹² Tilliette, *La mythologie comprise*, 57.

¹³ “La grandeur du Fait, et singulièrement du Fait de la Révélation, dont la réalité s’impose et qui ne saurait être anticipé *a priori*—et corrélativement l’impuissance des rationalismes à se hisser à la hauteur du Fait.” Xavier Tilliette, “Du dieu des philosophes au dieu des chrétiens,” *Archivio di filosofia* (1969): 469.

¹⁴ “Il prétend sauve garder l’autonomie de la philosophie. Les mêmes principes, en effet, régissent la philosophie négative et la philosophie positive.” Tilliette, “Du dieu,” 469.

knowable as revealed, in the general rather than special sense of the term ‘revelation.’

- b. A fact is an internal phenomenon that only has *being*¹⁵ (as well as only being knowable) in and through its effects or external results. The internal and the external are inextricable. There are no falling bodies without gravity and vice versa. There is no book without letters and vice versa. There is no will without an intended effect and vice versa. In this sense, one might say that a fact is that which both institutes the division and corresponding bond between the internal and external.
- c. Facts have a meaning. In other words, facts have intentions (which are not necessarily conscious and known) or, minimally, operative laws or principles at their base, even if such can only be known in the fact’s external result.
- d. Deeds are facts, which are thus only known historically and *if* a person reveals their will. Here one sees the traditional theological problematic concerning the relation of eternity and time come to the fore the most prominently. A deed’s effects, essential for the constitution of the identity of the will or deed, may incur a delay from the act of will, just as the eternal will of God may only be revealed through salvation history.
- e. The facticity of a fact is unaccountable by reason. Reason, unable to begin on its own (i.e., contra Tilliette’s Schelling-based understanding of Hegel, unable to begin as a logic by making itself into its own content), only has an object of analysis if one is given to it from elsewhere, i.e., apart from its own deductions. Reason, then, is confronted with various positivities or ‘givens’ (which are not equivalent to sense data) that impose upon reason the task of thinking them, of measuring up to them, including religious positivities like revelation in the special sense, e.g., Christian revelation, the incarnation and resurrection of the Messiah.¹⁶ Reason cannot thus dismiss religious or revelatory claim’s *a priori* or out of hand. Contra David Hume, not even an account of a miracle can be dismissed as impossibly containing epistemic warrant prior to investigating the (f)act of the matter.

¹⁵ One commentator of Tilliette does well to stress that given the emphasis on facticity, the ontological problematic must be one of reality rather than one of ideas. The reality—assumed or negated—of the Messiah decides what is essential. “It is not the idea of the divine, or even the idea of God, but the encounter or the failing of a person who is at the heart of philosophy [Ce n’est pas l’idée du divin, ou même l’idée de Dieu, mais la rencontre ou le défaut d’une personne, qui est au cœur de la philosophie].” Bertrand Saint-Sernin, “Un Peintre Chrétien,” in *Philosophie, Théologie, Littérature: Hommage à Xavier Tilliette, SJ pour ses quatre-vingt-dix ans*, ed. Miklos Vetö (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2011: 48).

¹⁶ Tilliette writes, “The proper reflection of philosophy on its essence and its history (self-questioning constitutes part of philosophy) drives it ineluctably toward a confrontation with religion, and singularly with positive religions that resist integration [La propre réflexion de la philosophie sur son essence et son histoire (l’autoquestionnement fait partie de la philosophie) la conduit inéluctablement à la confrontation avec la religion, et singulièrement avec les religions positives, qui résistent à l’intégration].” Tilliette, *Le Christ des philosophes*, 11.



- f. Finally, facts set the standard by which reason will be measured; reason cannot measure facts. Facticity is the ultimate criterion of truth, while reason only sets the criteria of validity.

Concerning this last point, one commentator on Tilliette has written, “God must be thought because he gives himself to be thought. In this sense, Christian theology needs philosophy.”¹⁷ Tilliette claims more though. It is not just that facts provide reason with something to think, whereby reason would receive this content neutrally as though it would not be altered by facts, but facts judge thought, sometimes condemning it for not living up to the standard set by the fact. This commentator does better, then, when he affirms that for Tilliette “philosophy does not lead to Christ, but with him . . . finds its point of departure.”¹⁸ That facts are, in this sense, ‘normative’ does not mean, however, that everything claimed as a fact really is a fact. One could still be an atheist or non-Christian. Facts are debatable (which is quite a different thing from affirming an ‘alternative fact’). If facts are not simply brute but have a meaning—there is no fact-value distinction—then to debate the meaning of a fact is tantamount to debating the fact itself. This is why two people can share the exact same sense data, yet one can state that it is a fact that a revolution is taking place and the other can ask, “What revolution?” Likewise, before the phenomenon of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, one can affirm that there is, in fact, a law at play here, but not one accessible to or predictable for humans. One could also, however, rather affirm not uncertainty but *indeterminacy* as the fact observed, i.e., that there simply is no lawfulness in effect here because spontaneity or contingency is a real principle of the universe.

If the Christian revelation, the life and death of the Messiah, is possibly a fact, then in what ways would it alter and judge philosophy rather than just being neutrally received as content for philosophy to think through? Three concrete examples were enumerated above: transubstantiation, free creation, and the interpenetration of time and eternity. These will soon be treated in turn, but first a brief negative propaedeutic. The scope of reason must be delimited further still so that it can be more precisely seen why reason is not the measure of things but is rather that which is measured. Tilliette furthers Kant’s tribunal of reason, albeit in a rather un-Kantian way, showing not just that reason is measured and finite, but that, consequently, it cannot be its own measure; it cannot enact its own tribunal. Accordingly, one has not necessarily committed any epistemic violations in proclaiming a revelatory event, e.g., Jesus the Messiah, even if one is speculating further than reason alone can go. It is precisely *because* reason is limited that one is authorized to proceed further than principled,

¹⁷ “Gott muß gedacht werden, weil er sich selbst zu denken gibt. In diesem Sinne bedarf christliche Theologie der Philosophie.” Werner Wedler, “Gedanken von Schiffbrüchigen . . .”—Anmerkungen zu Xavier Tilliettes ‚Philosophischer Christologie‘ aus protestantischer Sicht,” in *Vernunft und Glauben: Ein philosophischer Dialog der Moderne mit dem Christentum*, eds. Steffen Dietzsch & Gian Franco Frigo (Berlin: Akademie Verlag: Berlin, 2006): 47.

¹⁸ “Daß die Philosophie nicht zu Christus hinführt, sondern bei ihm . . . ihren Ausgangspunkt findet.” Wedler, “Gedanken,” 43.

Kantian skepticism would allow and to speculate freely. This is because, contra Kant, reason cannot enact its own criticism, but is judged by facticity, which is other than reason. We simply cannot remain within the bounds of reason alone.

As Tilliette suggests, in what could perhaps be a veiled criticism of Anselm of Canterbury, Baruch Spinoza and/or Hegel, “The passage from the rational to the supra-rational is not automatic. Reason is not destined, of itself, to transition to a ‘superior domain.’”¹⁹ Reason is not self-grounding, which means it cannot account for its own facticity. As Schelling has asked, “The entire world lies, as it were, ensnared within the nets of reason, but the question is: How has it come into these nets?” (SW IX: 142). Additionally, though, reason is not self-transcending, i.e., there is no “passage from the rational to the supra-rational.” If reason begins only with itself, then it ends only with itself. There is no transition from logic to fact, from validity to truth. For Tilliette, this insuperable breach is enough to found the possibility (without yet affirming the actuality) that Christian revelation can be a real fact. He exclaims, concerning Christological problems, “Their center of gravitation is the possibility of a Revelation. For this it is enough to justify a necessarily unfinished, but coherent, construction.”²⁰ That a system is open rather than closed, that its construction is unfinished and probably unfinishable, for which it would suffice that it is not self-grounding, is enough to found the *possibility* of affirming the incarnation and resurrection of the Messiah as a fact. On this basis alone, one has not necessarily committed any epistemic violations in proclaiming a revelatory event, e.g., Jesus the Messiah, even if one is speculating further than reason alone may venture.

Having shown (1) that reason, though valid, is not self-grounding and so, as it were, can provide no proof of completeness, and (2) that a Christology can be internally coherent, Tilliette is in a position to make two more claims. The first follows from the fact that, as incomplete, reason is ecstatic or opens onto, albeit without mediation or imminent transition, something in excess of itself. “It is this surplus, this excess, that which is inexhaustible for thought, that a Balthasar, with his ‘absolute Christology,’ opposes to the intrusion of a reason that is searching for its prey.”²¹ Reasoning that searches for prey is a reasoning that judges would-be facts because it falsely believes that it sets the standard against which facts must be measured rather than vice versa. The second claim positively affirms the ‘normative’ quality of a proposed fact, in this case the incarnation and resurrection of the Messiah. This fact, should it prove actually to be one, would set the standard against which reason will be measured rather than vice versa. “The incarnation is insurmountable, an indelible referent, otherwise there would be a desire to attain to what is revealed without the

¹⁹ “Mais le passage du rationnel au supra-rationnel n’est pas automatique. La raison ne se détermine pas d’elle-même à transiter au ‘domaine supérieur.’” Tilliette, “Du dieu,” 470.

²⁰ “Leur centre de gravitation est la possibilité d’une Révélation. C’en est assez pour justifier une construction forcément inachevée, mais cohérente.” Tilliette, *Qu’est-ce que*, 13.

²¹ “C’est ce surplus, ce surcroît, l’inépuisable pour la pensée, qu’un Balthasar avec sa ‘christologie absolue’ oppose à l’intrusion d’une raison cherchant sa proie.” Tilliette, *Le Christ des philosophes*, 477.

Revealed One.”²² Reason, confronted with its own incompleteness, cannot first desire that something be revealed to it, but this desire is instead first produced only once reason has already been confronted with, nay, traumatized by, the Revealed. The object of revelation does not, so to speak, meet reason’s desire to have something to think, but reason is first inspired to actual thought only once it has been encountered by a hitherto unaccountable fact.

It is from this place, then, beginning with the ‘normativity’ of the fact, that Tilliette is able to corroborate those larger and more sweeping claims he promises at the beginning of his books on Christology. For instance,

It is Christ who interrogates philosophy, who calls out its pretensions, thereby also ‘disturbing’ it. The question of Christ—Who do you say that I am? Who does one say that I am?—equally addresses philosophers. He not only interrogates philosophy, but, in the end, he judges it.²³

To temper this, however, one must also note a certain restriction. “To remove every equivocation: this legitimate philosophical Christology is the work of a confessional philosopher; it resides on the support of Christian philosophy.... It supposes more than an agreement, an interaction between philosophy and theology.”²⁴ This is more than a mere agreement, because it is not two autonomous domains that just happen to be in accord. They are rather only in accord because faith or the confessional aspect plays the predominant role. The work of philosophical Christology, i.e., of bringing Christology into harmony with philosophy, revelation into harmony with reason, is the work of faith, the work of a confessor. Christology is necessarily an article of Christian philosophy. A Muslim, Jew or atheist would likely not get far off the ground. The principle, then, is that faith and reason are conciliatory but not coincidental; there is no elision of one into the other.

Tilliette acknowledges the danger of making each coincide with the other. “The risk, in effect, is to absorb philosophy and its wisdom into piety, into the

²² “L’incarnation est insurmontable, un référent indélébile, sinon ce serait vouloir atteindre du révélé sans le Révélant.” Tilliette, *Le Christ des philosophes*, 475.

²³ “C’est le Christ qui interroge la philosophie, qui l’interpelle dans ses prétentions, là aussi il est celui qui ‘dérange’. La question du Christ: Qui dis-tu que je suis? Qui dit-on que je suis ? s’adresse également aux philosophes. Non seulement il interroge la philosophie, mais en définitive il la juge.” Tilliette, *Le Christ des philosophes*, 11.

²⁴ “Pour lever toute équivoque: cette christologie philosophique légitime est l’œuvre du philosophe croyant, elle repose sur l’appui de la philosophie chrétienne.... suppose plus qu’une entente, une interaction, entre la philosophie et la théologie.” Tilliette, *Le Christ des philosophes*, 471. See also, “Christian philosophy ... is destined, in principle, to make the bed of philosophical Christology. If the center of Christianity is Christ and his unique message, then philosophical Christology must be at the center of Christian philosophy [La philosophie chrétienne ... est destinée par principe à faire le lit de la christologie philosophique. Si le centre du christianisme est le Christ et son message unique, alors la christologie philosophique doit être au centre de la philosophie chrétienne.” Tilliette, *Qu’est-ce que*, 27.

devotion of Christ.”²⁵ On the one hand, the confessional philosopher is saved from fragmentation, finding herself neither obliged nor inclined to separate the Messiah of faith from the historical personage of Jesus of Nazareth, but, on the other hand, she risks doing more than just acknowledging that philosophy is not autarkical and self-engendering, but she risks letting philosophy be annexed into confessional theology. That philosophy might serve as handmaiden to theology is one thing. That it would have no other function is quite another thing. In any event, though philosophy may not be the exclusive trove of confessional theology, Christology is not just something that can be thought by philosophy, but it alters and judges philosophy. There is not only philosophical Christology, but also ‘Christological philosophy.’ Concretely, Tilliette exhibits this by showing (1) how transubstantiation critiques substance ontology; (2) how the notion of the creation of the world provides the indispensable conditions for free creativity as such; and (3) how any philosophy of freedom must account for the relationship between eternity and time, a traditionally theological notion.

Three Exemplars

The theological notion of transubstantiation is not merely but one piece of a *summa theologica*, it is a piece that can alter the understanding of the whole of reality, thus transforming notions in cosmology generally. Tilliette develops this line of thought primarily through his reading of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Blondel. As David Grumett has argued,

Père Tilliette shows how the Eucharist is not exceptional but exemplary. The presence of Christ in eucharistic substance, which the doctrine of transubstantiation describes, points to a larger metaphysical truth: that Christ sustains and gives consistency to other substances in the world, acting as the ‘bond of substance.’ Substance is not, in other words, mere extension in the Cartesian sense, but a theological and even Christological notion.²⁶

It is not simply that the eucharistic notion of transubstantiation undermines the Cartesian notion of substance as *extensio*, but it also undermines the entire modern, philosophical notion of substance as something that exists through itself, i.e., without relations. In René Descartes there is no relation between thinking and extended substances, a problematic transmitted to John Locke, George Berkeley and Hume, just as in Spinoza there is no relation between substances at all because there is only one substance and in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz substances are without relation because they have no windows. The modern notion of substance, then, is a discrete,

²⁵ “Le risque en effet est d’absorber la philosophie et sa sagesse dans la pitié, dans la dévotion au Christ.” Tilliette, *Qu’est-ce que*, 17.

²⁶ David Grumett, “Christ as Substance in Teilhard and Blondel,” in *Philosophie, Théologie, Littérature: Hommage à Xavier Tilliette, SJ pour ses quatre-vingt-dix ans*, ed. Miklos Vetö (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2011), 133.



isolated, self-enclosed, self-sufficient unit; substance is without (constituent) relations. More debatably, one might even argue that the notion of transubstantiation undermines the very notion of substance that runs throughout the whole of Western philosophy. Aristotle, although he does not deny that substances are altered and emerge through causal interactions with other substances, still ultimately closes substance up in autarkical *choriston*, 'that which exists apart.' Consequently, although relations are not denied, it is still far from a relational ontology, and this seems to be the judgment that the theological notion of the eucharist pronounces upon the properly philosophical notion of substance.

The eucharist reveals the actual substantiality of substance; it offers the very condition of substantiality, 'the bond of substance' or, as Grumett further explains, "the bond which makes substantiation possible, the vivifying agent for all creation."²⁷ This should be reminiscent of Paul's claim that Christ is the one in whom and through whom we move and have our being. That 'in which we move and have our being' also pronounces judgment on modern dualism. A transubstantiated element is neither reducible to mere *extensio* and *nor* is it pure thought. "The nature of Christ includes a '*universal physical reality*, a certain cosmic extension of his Body and Soul.'"²⁸

Finally, let it also be added that it is very strange indeed to denounce the notion of transubstantiation as absurd and magical, while accepting and even apologetically defending the incarnation. If that without a body and without matter can become embodied and human, then surely that which is already corporeal and material, bread and wine, can be transubstantiated into something else that is also corporeal and material.

A second way in which Christian revelation alters, judges and/or expands philosophical notions and solutions lies in the idea of free creation, a notion presumably foreign to pagan mythology and early Greek philosophy, which rather espoused a non-creative God (Aristotle),²⁹ demiurgic notions (Plato), the idea that the gods emerged from nature³⁰ rather than the inverse, or that reality is the unavoidable overflowing of a supereminent and superabundant nature (Plotinus). Aristotle's god perhaps creates nothing at all, only narcissistically turned toward itself (and so away from the possibility of another, the creation), the demiurge does not create *ex nihilo* but is only a craftsman, and the One of Plotinian Neoplatonism is perhaps incontinent, an unpreventable overflow or procession, even if Plotinus does temper this with an equally unavoidable return to the source.

The philosophical problematic that is really at stake here, though, the third exemplary way that revelation critiques and enlarges philosophical thought, is that of time and eternity. In this respect, more work is needed on the contemporary relevance of the debate between Proclus and John Philoponus concerning the eternity of the

²⁷ Grumett, "Christ as Substance," 134.

²⁸ Grumett, "Christ as Substance," 138.

²⁹ Tilliette infers, "The passage from Pure Act to Creative Act is far from self-evident." Tilliette, "Trinity and Creation," 299.

³⁰ See Hesiod, *The Theogony. Works and Days*. (Loeb Classical Library), trans. Glenn W. Most (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

world.³¹ If Philoponus insists on a ‘time’ between God’s being alone in advance of the creation, it is because this interval is required for God’s freedom, to ensure that there is not an immediate and necessary transition from the principle to the principled or from cause to effect. Surely, time *cannot* simply be the moving image of eternity. Modern philosophy knows full well that if there is no breach drawn between potency and act, but that if the movement *a potentia ad actum* is perfectly continuous or even contiguous, then the result is Spinozism, which Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi infamously spied as fatalism and, ultimately, atheism. This is not simply to side with Philoponus in this ancient debate. There may be a third path that accepts the eternity of the world, as Thomas Aquinas suspected, but not without drawing an equally eternal breach between God and the creation, hence Thomas thought of God’s causality as non-univocal. The Hebraic Scriptures and the Kabbalist tradition too perhaps referred to this interstice as the co-eternal Wisdom of God, who played before God for all eternity. Tilliette, appealing to these traditions and citing from the apocryphal *Book of Wisdom*, posits, “The delight Wisdom brings the Creator, ‘rejoicing always before him, ’implies the necessity, so to speak, of introducing a mediation, an intermediary, between God and his creation.”³² However conceived, it is only if the transition from the possibility of the creation to its actualization is not immediate, if there is an interstice, whether eternal or temporal in nature, that the creation can be free rather than incontinent, an unavoidable emanation. Time is also hereby no longer thought as the moving image of eternity, but as a surplus, an extra, a contingent addition to eternity.

If the Christian notion of free creation calls into question traditional ideas about the relation between time and eternity, then it also concerns the meaning of time, i.e., the meaning of history or, in theological terms, ‘eschatology’. As Tilliette notes, commenting on the Christology of Michel Henry, “There is no philosophical Christology without eschatology because the effort speculatively to comprehend Christ implies a *state* that transcends the conditions of time.”³³ Peter Henrici, commenting on Tilliette, states the effect theological notions drawn from revelation enact on philosophy. “The puzzles, which philosophical reflection on time uncovers, can perhaps ultimately be solved only on the basis of a Christology, a teaching of God in time. This solution is, however, no longer the task of the philosopher; he must cede this to theology.”³⁴ While it may be too much to say that philosophy should retreat in

³¹ See Proclus, *On the Eternity of the World (de Aeternitate Mundi)*, trans. Helen S. Lang & L.D. Marco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), and John Philoponus, *Against Proclus’ On the Eternity of the World*, trans. Michael Share (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005).

³² Tilliette, “Trinity and Creation,” 297.

³³ “il n’y a pas de christologie philosophique sans eschatologie, parce que l’effort de comprendre spéculativement le Christ implique un *état* qui transcende les conditions du temps.” *La christologie*, 378.

³⁴ “Die Rätsel, die ein philosophisches Nachdenken über die Zeit aufdeckt, können vielleicht letztlich nur auf dem Boden einer Christologie, einer Lehre vom Gott in der Zeit gelöst werden. Diese Auflösung ist jedoch nicht mehr Aufgabe des Philosophen; er muss sie der Theologie überlassen.” Peter Henrici, “Der Philosoph und die Zeit,” in *Philosophie, Theologie, Literatur: Hommage à Xavier Tilliette, SJ pour ses quatre-vingt-dix ans*. Ed. Miklos Vetö (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2011), 96.



silence by surrendering certain problems to theology, one can at least say that there are problems before which philosophy would necessarily fall silent were it not able to be informed and critiqued by theology and revelation. In one marvelous passage, Tilliette thus quips that “modern philosophy without the visitation of Christianity is reduced to a superior logic.”³⁵

It is precisely concerning the relationship between revelation and philosophy that Tilliette, despite the generally positive and largely ubiquitous influence otherwise enacted, is eager to critique Schelling. Tilliette bemoans,

The grave reproach that one must make against Schelling is that he interprets the Christian phenomenon with the aid of principles and categories forged for other uses at the risk of evacuating the mystery and absolute novelty.... He rejoins the ‘religion conceived’ of Hegel and proposes an alliance between Christianity and science.... What is said to be the office of philosophy, to comprehend everything, must be true even of religion!³⁶

If Tilliette learns of the incompleteness of reason and its impotency to deduce facts from itself from Schelling, then he finds it equally remarkable that Schelling does not let reason undergo any real alteration in form when confronted with the fact of revelation. Concerning the positive inheritance Schelling leaves for Tilliette, Marc Maesschalck remarks, “It is notably reason for which it is impossible for a rational philosophy to render ‘comprehensible a free creation of the world.’ This radical epistemological critique is at the basis of every partition of Schelling’s last philosophy between positive and negative philosophy.”³⁷ Philosophy, which begins not *with* knowledge but only with a ‘wanting’ for knowledge, as Schelling is always quick to stress, must presuppose a non-rational (which is not equivalent to the irrational) and non-philosophical (which is not equivalent to the anti-philosophical) element. Why then does Schelling let reason stand unmoved before this, before facts that cannot be exhausted by reason? As Emilio Brito notices,

[Schelling] seems to cross the boundaries of philosophy without so much as pretending to elaborate a dogmatics ... he is conscious of not being able to

³⁵ “La philosophie moderne sans la visitation du christianisme se réduit à une logique supérieure.” Tilliette, *Qu’est-ce que*, 25.

³⁶ “Le reproche grave que l’on doit faire à Schelling, est qu’il interprète le phénomène chrétien à l’aide de principes et de catégories forgés pour d’autres usages au risque d’en évacuer le mystère et l’absolue nouveauté.... il rejoint la ‘religion comprise’ de Hegel, et il propose une alliance du christianisme et de la science.... Que ce soit l’office de la philosophie de tout comprendre, même la religion, soit!” Tilliette, “Du dieu,” 469f.

³⁷ “C’est notamment la raison pour laquelle il est impossible pour une philosophie rationnelle de rendre ‘compréhensible une libre création du monde.’ Cette critique épistémologique radicale qui est à la base de toute la partition de la dernière philosophie de Schelling entre philosophie positive et philosophie négative.” (Marc Maesschalck, “L’engendrement du commencement selon Schelling: signification et enjeux d’une protologie de la conscience,” in *Philosophie, Théologie, Littérature : Hommage à Xavier Tilliette, SJ pour ses quatre-vingt-dix ans*. Ed. Miklos Vetö (Louvain: Editions Peeters, 2011): 299).

deduce *a priori* the truth of Christianity.... In this way, he risks transforming into 'knowledge' the historical deployment of the wisdom of God.³⁸

Given that he correctly sees that Christianity cannot be rationally deduced, Schelling apparently errs in still affirming, or least risking, that reason transforms historical revelation rather than revelation transforming reason. Although, as Brito affirms, Schelling "has tested the limits of thought,"³⁹ Brito cannot help but emphasize a lingering ambivalence in Schelling.

History finds its foundation in an unaccountable divine decision. But, the theological limit of this thought, even in his last phase, is to propose a kind of semi-rationalism, too inclined to insinuate that our reason can see into the game of God, conceiving *post factum* the depths of divine revelation.⁴⁰

To draw a few conclusions, as Tilliette emphasizes, "Only a philosophy that profoundly modifies itself, that 'enlarges itself,' or even changes its dress, can measure up."⁴¹ Now, "under [Pauline] conditions"—as found in 2 Corinthians 10:5 and Colossians 2:8, which harshly denounce philosophical argumentation, and 1 Corinthians 1:18, which speaks of the "foolishness of the Cross," a stumbling block to Greeks who look for wisdom—"the idea of philosophical Christology appears absurd."⁴² Tilliette does not deny these Pauline strictures. Nevertheless, he does want to subject theology, to a degree, to philosophy, but only in order to expose philosophy to judgment in light of the Fact of Revelation. Philosophy, left to itself, will falter, but if called into question, if critiqued and transformed by revelation, it can render a service to theology. Reason should play the role of handmaiden and auxiliary rather than that of arbiter and judge. As Wilhelm G. Jacobs argues, "Tilliette attempts to show how philosophical thinking is led to the form of Christ and thereby even to theology, and how both—as mutually completing—subsist alongside one another."⁴³

³⁸ "[Schelling] semble franchir les frontières de la philosophie, sans pour autant prétendre élaborer une dogmatique . . . il est conscient de ne pas pouvoir déduire *a priori* la vérité du christianisme . . . il risque ainsi de transformer en 'savoir' le déploiement historique de la sagesse de Dieu" (Emilio Brito, SJ, "Idéalisme allemand et théologie chrétienne," in *Philosophie, Théologie, Littérature: Hommage à Xavier Tilliette, SJ pour ses quatre-vingt-dix ans*. Ed. Miklos Vetö (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2011): 191).

³⁹ Tilliette, "Idéalisme allemand," 192.

⁴⁰ "L'histoire trouve son fondement dans une décision divine indevançable. Mais la limite théologique de cette pensée, même dans sa dernière phase, c'est de proposer une sorte de semi-rationalisme, trop enclin à insinuer que notre raison peut voir dans le jeu de Dieu, concevoir *post factum* les profondeurs de la révélation divine." "Idéalisme allemand," 191f.

⁴¹ "Seule une philosophie qui se modifie profondément, qui 's'élargit', ou même qui change de cap, peut y parvenir." Tilliette, "Du dieu," 468.

⁴² "Unter diesen Bedingungen scheint die Idee der philosophischen Christologie absurd." Tilliette, "Ist," 171.

⁴³ "Tilliette versucht zu zeigen, wie das philosophische Denken auf die Gestalt Christi und damit dann auch auf die Theologie geführt wird und beides—sich ergänzend—nebeneinander besteht." Wilhelm G. Jacobs, "Laudatio auf Prof. dr. P. Xavier Tilliette S.J.," in *Berliner Schelling Studien 6: Festschrift für Xavier*



Alongside one another—this means that faith and reason are parallel or with (*con*) one another (con-ciliatory but not coextensive). Neither can be annexed to the other, neither devotion to analysis nor analysis to devotion. Faith and reason are thus not perfectly complementary, as they do not necessarily arrive at the same destination, but nor are they in conflict. Or, better, they are conciliatory, but without coinciding with each other. The truths of philosophy are not the truths of revelation and vice versa, even if these truths would also not be mutually exclusive.

This study has hopefully provided sufficiently concrete instances of how revelation for Tilliette critiques and alters philosophy, and how faith dictates to reason, rather than vice versa. The three exemplars discussed are (1) the theological notion of transubstantiation not as an exception to general ontological principles but instead as the exemplary instance of the 'flesh' of the world as relational rather than substantial; (2) the Christian conception of free creation and the critique it enacts against Aristotle's impossibly creative God, the Platonic demiurge and the Plotinian conception of creation as an imminent, rather than contingent and free, overflow of superabundance; and (3) how theological discussion of the relation of eternity and time, divine will and history, can be employed to respond to apparent impasses in the philosophy of freedom generally. Having exhibited that and how revelation judges and expands the borders of philosophy, it is clear that any philosophical Christology is equally a christological philosophy, i.e., a philosophy, a general ontology, that has first learned from the fact of the revelation, namely, the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah.

As a general principle, it could be said that what revelation does to philosophy, what faith does to reason, and what the Messiah does to the wisdom of the world is to enact a transvaluation of values. This transvaluation, however, is no more manifest than in the event of the Cross and, hence, in christological ruminations. How the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah, however, most incisively enacts its judgment upon philosophy or the wisdom of the world more generally, remains to be discussed in a forthcoming article on Xavier Tilliette.⁴⁴

Tilliette anlässlich der Verleihung der Humboldt-Medaille durch das Institut für Philosophie der Humboldt-Universität (Berlin: Total Verlag, 2006): 44.

⁴⁴To be published in *Kabiri IV* (2022).