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## PHILOSOPHY AND THE CHRISTIAN

AN INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 2 OF *AD FONTES*

Tertullian famously asked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” The relationship between faith and reason, between the Holy Scriptures and natural revelation, and between Christian doctrine and non-Christian philosophy, has been the subject of immense debate within the Christian tradition. Unfortunately, the history of this conflict has been frequently caricatured and misunderstood. So before we attempt our own constructive answer to these questions today, we must first properly come to grips with the answers of the past. Just what was “philosophy” for our ancestors? Have the questions and intellectual postures associated with it changed, or is there significant continuity between “ancient” and “modern” philosophy? What were the doctors of the church thinking of specifically when they either condemned or affirmed the enterprise? And most importantly, where does that leave the church today? This year’s longer editions of *Ad Fontes* will present a non-exhaustive survey of how Christians have navigated through this territory in the history of the Christian church. Our goal in doing so is not to commend slavish obedience to their example, but rather to provide an opportunity for critical reflection upon their wisdom for the sake of further cultivation in the present.

## THE EARLY CHRISTIAN APPROPRIATION OF PAGAN PIETY | BLAKE ADAMS

This essay, like Gaul, is divided into three parts, but it begins with the same question Adolf von Harnack asked over a hundred years ago: What is Christianity? Like Harnack, we desire a historical answer. Christianity insistently directs its origin to a divine revelation to humanity in the person of Jesus, the Messiah and the Son of God, and while other definitions are available to us, a historical one is the most appropriate for a discussion on the early Church appropriation of pagan piety.

I will investigate two competing historical definitions. The first definition, Christianity as Hellenized Judaism, belongs to Harnack; the second, Christianity as the Expectation of the Nations, belongs to the early Church. However, any discussion of historic Christianity

requires some mention of the doctrine of divine revelation. The first part of this essay, then, will be a necessary Catechetical defining of this term.

### DIVINE REVELATION AS GOD'S SELF-DISCLOSURE

Revelation, defined, is God making Himself known to us for the sake of establishing communion with Him.

Ancient theologians and apologists cited Scripture at great length to prove Jesus was the Messiah of fulfilled prophecy, as He claimed to be. And yet, despite centuries of study and familiarity with the proph-

ets, the Messiah turned out to be like nothing anyone expected, which is enough to deny that Christianity can be explained as the result of literary exercise. The Scriptures could not predetermine that a man called Jesus is the Messiah. Rather, the prophetic texts awaited the Messiah to declare Himself, and only then could they be “fulfilled in our hearing.”<sup>1</sup>

Christianity also cannot be explained as the result of dialectic reasoning. Ancient Greek philosophers reasoned that above their pantheon of quarrelling deities is “the first God” who is “incorporeal, immovable, and invisible, and is in need of nothing external to Himself.”<sup>2</sup> Uncreated, immortal, and immutable, there was none other equal to or higher than this God. The gods of the nations whose idols we worship are His subordinates. Unlike them, the supreme God of the Greeks does not reveal Himself in history: He is known through the mind alone. Therefore, He has no image or temple, He is offered no sacrifices, and He is not worshiped through song or speech of any kind, but rather, the pagan Porphyry says, “we should venerate Him in profound silence with a pure soul, and with pure conceptions about Him.”<sup>3</sup>

How can such a God be known? As stated, the Greek answer is “through the mind alone” by dialectical reasoning. In the ancient dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks a friend about the nature of piety. Euthyphro responds that “the pious is that which is loved by the gods.”<sup>4</sup> Socrates points out that the gods, being many, may disagree amongst themselves or love different things.<sup>5</sup> He aptly responds that the inevitable inference is that “what is pleasing to the gods is also hateful to them. Thus, Euthyphro, it would not be strange at all if what you now are doing...were pleasing to Zeus, but hateful to Cronus and Uranus, and welcome to Hephaestus, but odious to Hera, and if any other of the gods disagree about the matter, satisfactory to some of them, and odious to others.”<sup>6</sup> Following this reasoning, how can there be piety among men, and how can we identify anything as holy or sinful, when there is a plurality of deities?<sup>7</sup> This creates a dilemma: Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious

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because it is loved by the gods?<sup>8</sup> The only resolution is the existence of a God who is supreme above all the others. Even if there were only two gods, their existence would implicate something yet higher, which alone would be supreme.

Although a great intellectual achievement, this also fails to explain Christianity for us. In fact, the philosophers would deny Jesus was the same as the supreme God, taking it as a given that such a deity could not be both supreme and also interact with the material world. In fact, they even denied the supreme God could have created the universe, a task they credited to the Demiurge, a lower deity. There is ample material here with which Christians can agree, but in the end this thinking cannot anticipate that someone like Jesus is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”<sup>9</sup> So finally, the claim that Jesus is the Son of God is not a dialectic conclusion. We are unequipped to infer such things. Again, we must await the Son of God to announce Himself first.

Both prophecy and philosophy at their height orient us toward true religion by affirming there is a Christ and a supreme God, but they do not deliver us there of their own power. Salvation does not reside in a book or in the mind. Ultimately, it is God Himself who induces us to realize that He is who He says He is, and makes possible communion with Him. To encounter that revelation is to experience an epistemic breakdown where faith alone may enter.

What is the nature of this faith? To illustrate, let’s say you told me your favorite color. Whatever it is, I’d be inclined to believe you, not because I already know what your favorite color is (and therefore can determine on my own that you aren’t lying to me), but because there is no way to know what your favorite color is *unless* you tell me. It is highly specialized, exclusive information that could not be deduced from

your wardrobe choices, favorite highlighter, or any number of brain scans. Your word is the final one; it is the “evidence of things not seen.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, once you disclose your favorite color, who can deny it? You alone can supply such self-disclosure, because it is something only you can know. You could not lie to another person about it without simultaneously lying about yourself. Your exclusive right to such information compels either faith or a rejection of your whole person.

Faith rests in the authority of its source, not in the individual’s faculties. It is the same with God’s revelation. The object of faith is knowledge (pertaining to divine law, divine will, salvation, etc.) that we could not acquire through the powers of reason or experience. It awaits divine utterance, and it is believed not because we can determine for ourselves what is divine truth, but because God alone has authority to speak on things pertaining to Himself. In short, revelation is God’s self-disclosure.<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century bishop, writes:

1. Luke 4:21. In this passage, Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-2 and afterwards speaks the words cited above. This is not the first time Jesus implicates that He is the Son of God, but it is the first time He holds up Scripture as the certificate of His identity.

2. Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, trans. by Gillian Clark; reprint edition (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2014), 2.37, 34.

3. *Ibid.*, 34.

4. Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. by Lane Cooper (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6c-7a.

5. As they often do.

6. *Euth.* 8a-b.

7. It is easy to imagine a Christian saying these words, as well as those of Porphyry above. In fact, Augustine goes so far as to suggest that Porphyry was writing about the Christian God, albeit through a glass darkly: “In fine, He is the God whom Porphyry, the most learned of the philosophers, though the bitterest [critic] of the Christians, confesses to be a great God, even according to the oracles of those whom he esteems gods” (Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. by Marcus Dods, D.D. (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 19.22).

8. *Euth.* 10a.

9. Col. 1:15, ESV.

10. Heb. 11:1, KJV.

11. God does not disclose insights that do not pertain to Himself. This is so because the aim of any act of revelation is communion with Him. Modern critics of Christianity

Action, then, comes by faith, as ‘if you do not believe’ Isaias says, ‘you will not understand’; and the truth brings about faith, for faith is established upon things truly real, that we may believe what really is, as it is, and believing what really is, as it is, we may always keep our conviction of it firm. Since, then, the conserver of our salvation is faith, it is necessary to take great care of it, that we may have a true comprehension of what is.<sup>12</sup>

It is on the revelation of God in Christ where the Christian faith rests. A rote observation is that Christianity did not fit comfortably in either Judaism or Hellenism. This is to be expected, if the Church is what she claims to be: the human “care” of a heavenly deposit. Subsequently, the history of doctrine is about a Church frequently taking issue with the cultural and philosophical contents which converts bring along with them, whether they be Jew or Greek.

## CHRISTIANITY AS HELLENIZED JUDAISM

In A.D. 609, Christians gathered in Rome to consecrate the Pantheon. The temple was a massive domed room dedicated nearly five centuries earlier to seven pagan deities: Apollo, Diana, Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, Saturn, and Venus. The niches where their idols once stood are still intact, but in their places are relics of martyrs and depictions of Christ’s life.

The Christians had unique ideas about what made something holy. Because God was omnipresent, then any location was suitable for worship. Unlike their pagan neighbors, Christians did not consider any place or thing intrinsically holy simply because it was the designated space for religious practice. Rather, it was only made holy through an association with the lives of the Apostles and Jesus Christ. Consequently, it was commonplace to build churches on top of the graves of Apostles or martyrs. Since this was not a possibility with the Pantheon, twenty-eight cartloads of martyrs’ remains were removed from the Roman catacombs and placed beneath the altar. Once the consecration was complete, legend tells that seven demons, suddenly finding themselves in someone else’s home, fled in terror. The Pan-

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often ask why God did not give us mathematical formulas, since these would have been genuinely useful; we take His silence on the subject to mean humanity’s salvation is not to be accomplished through scientific advances. The same critics also assert that, if God (hypothetically) declared  $2+2=5$ , we would blindly agree. In such a case, it would be a question whether this was a divine revelation, since God would be dealing in information we are equipped to know on our own.

12. Irenaeus, *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. by John Behr (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 1:1.

theon, after hosting half a millennia of heathen worship, now qualified as a Christian holy site. It remains a Christian church to this day.

Displacing one faith with another, while keeping the pagan architecture intact, may serve as an analogy for the Christian appropriation of pagan piety. Seen this way, Christianity is like a spirit filling and animating a Hellenic cultural framework. This is a common way to describe what took place. But, while helpful, the analogy is unsuitable in some respects. For example, it insinuates the Christian religion is limited by the Hellenism in which it found its early expression.

This latter view ties into the thesis of Adolf von Harnack in his fiery work, *What Is Christianity?* His argument is that the Christian tradition is effectively Hellenized, which he understood to be a corruption of the divine revelation at its core. According to Harnack, the purity of God’s revelation was deformed to fit into an ancient Greek framework. It is now difficult—if not impossible—to know what is Greek and what is Christian.

We find in Harnack’s thesis pollution on two fronts: the cultural and the intellectual. While these are typically found together, they are distinct. Harnack argues the intellectual corruption begins with the writings of Justin Martyr in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century. However, the cultural pollution must precede that, since it is the necessary setup for the latter to occur. Let’s investigate both in their chronological order.

The Pantheon itself is a case in point regarding the cultural pollution of the early Church. It was one of several pagan temples to be repurposed into churches during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, the Pantheon still retains memories of its origin. To the modern onlooker, it might be unremarkable that the inner sanctuary is round. But to the pagan builders, the shape was a visual demonstration of the equal status shared by the seven gods. After entering the sanctuary, a worshipper could wander to any one of the niches, or cycle through all seven, or just pay respects to three or four. He had options. Conversely, when Christians built their own churches, the sanctuaries were long and narrow. Worshipers walked the length of a basilica from porch to apse, ascending from the world to a *single* point of devotion at the head of the building: the communion table. These two layouts illustrate fundamentally different ideas about the divine nature and the manner of proper devotion. How can Christians justify gathering in a temple where the very architecture teaches things antithetical to true monotheistic religion? Shouldn’t this temple be destroyed and replaced by a proper church, rather than preserved?



THE INTERIOR OF THE PANTHEON, BY GIOVANNI PAOLO PANINI (1735)

Christianity was born in a society which had already existed for centuries, and which it had not helped to create. Despite its original purpose as a pagan temple, the Pantheon was now occupied by a new set of worshippers. But in an important sense, it was the same set of worshippers. Everyone in attendance was either a former pagan or the descendant of pagans. The Christians did not claim the Pantheon as spoil from their conquest of the Greeks: they were the Greeks. It was their own temple which they repurposed into their own church.

Today, the (former) Pantheon features a prominent Christian altar across from the entryway. Despite the shape of the room, the sanctuary now has a distinctive head toward which the worshipper is drawn, converting any experience of the layout into a distinctively Christian one. Like Abraham departing Egypt with livestock and riches in tow, the early Church pressed formerly-heathen properties into the service of God.

From its beginning, the church was confronted with the problem of what it could allow, approve, or reject in its Greek inheritance. It is easy for us to slip into imagining this period as a sort of stand-off between the Christian and the Greek worlds. Statements abound depicting one in opposition to the other. The estimable Dariusz Karłowicz reminds his students that “the Christian theologians utilized arguments lifted out of the Greeks, but against the Greeks.”<sup>13</sup> This sort of language is necessary to an extent. The Church Fathers themselves use it. Justin Martyr wrote *An Exhortation to the Greeks*, where he criticizes teachings sourced in the Homeric tradition.<sup>14</sup> Though it is obvious he is not addressing Christians, we often forget the author was himself Greek.

When we say Greek, it begs the question: Greek *what*? Justin was a Greek Christian, and the substantive governs the modifier. Greek, in this sense, does not stand in opposition to Christian, but to other substantives: pagan, gnostic, etc. These are the enemies of the Church to whom the apologist writes or answers. But for the remainder of this essay, we will use *Greek* in the same sense in which Justin and Karłowicz use it: implicating a certain people of varying beliefs and philosophies who continue to live, whether through ignorance or

13. Dariusz Karłowicz, *Socrates and Other Saints: Early Christians Understandings of Reason and Philosophy* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 42.

14. It is uncertain whether Justin is the actual author of this work. In any event, it was written by a knowledgeable, if anonymous, Greek Christian apologist, which is enough for the purposes of this essay.

stubbornness, as though the Christ, the Son of God, had not recently arrived on earth.<sup>15</sup>

The early theologians did not use Greek philosophical arguments like a soldier might use an enemy’s weapon he stumbled upon in the field of battle. Historically, philosophy came first for the Greeks, then the revelation of God. This sequence was true personally for most of the first apologists, as well. Long before they read Scripture, they read

Plato and Seneca. Many were philosophers before they were Christians, and continued to refer to themselves as such after conversion. Philosophy, for them, was not a helpful afterthought, nor a mere evangelical tool for converting other philosophers. They testified that it had prepared them for the truth of the Gospel; a realization they expanded to explain the place of Greek philosophy in God’s plan to save the non-Jewish nations. In Christ, philosophy was not destroyed but perfected.

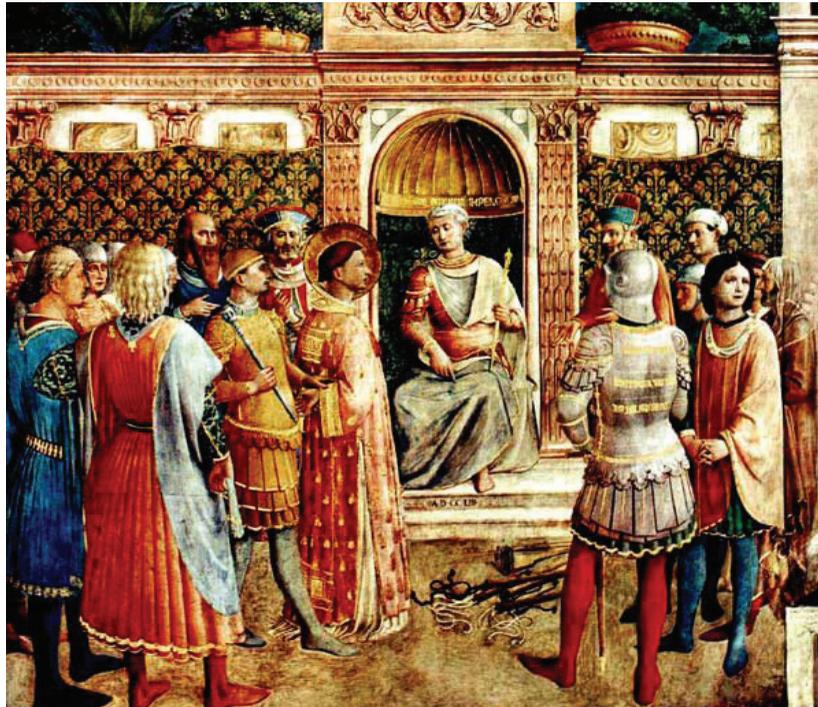
Given the above, we can also dispose of an assumption which gives Harnack’s thesis more clout than it deserves: Namely, the presupposition that a pure and Hellenism-free

Christianity preceded the later, corrupt version. Assuming this pure Christianity did exist, how might we describe it? What were its contents, before they were sullied by Greek influence? Only one description is available to us: By *pure Christianity*, what is inevitably meant in this context is a purely *Semitic Christianity*.

The first Christians were Jews. In fact, the Church did not initially think herself as separate from the Jewish people. (Though Jesus had harsh things to say to the Pharisees, so does the Jewish Talmud.) God’s call was to the Jew first, and the call to the Gentile was a matter of dispute for a time. In fact, this dispute would contribute majorly to the split between church and synagogue (probably A.D. 85). But for at least a period, it was remarkable if a Christian was *not* a Jew. And yet, the first generation of Church Fathers after the Apostles were Gentiles.<sup>16</sup> Of course, these successors had worked closely with the Apostles, and the number of Jews within the Church remained substantial. Still, if only in a carnal sense, the reigns of the Church had in a matter of decades transferred from one ancient people to another.

15. Their use of *Jew* is similar.

16. Two might not have been.



THE TRIAL OF JUSTIN THE PHILOSOPHER, BY FRA ANGELICO (1395-1455)

How great were the cultural transformations that accompanied this transition? Harnack neglects to indicate what degree of Hellenization is permissible before there is corruption, but on the assumption that the presence of any Greek influence is cause for alarm, we run into a difficulty: The Jewish world had already undergone Hellenization long before Jesus' time. Beginning in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Jews had spread throughout the empire in what historians call the Diaspora. Living amongst Greeks, and disconnected from their religious center in Jerusalem, a crisis of faith emerged when many Jewish families stopped speaking Hebrew. In response, the holy Scriptures were translated into a different language (i.e., Koine Greek) for the first time, probably in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. The result was the Septuagint—so called to commemorate the seventy scholars tasked with the translation. When it first appeared, the Septuagint was praised throughout Jewish communities and widely regarded as an inspired translation on par with the original. Many Jews (and later Christians) would never read or hear a word of Scripture in Hebrew.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the pinnacle of Jewish Hellenist scholarship was reached by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria. A contemporary of Christ,<sup>18</sup> he saw in the stories of the Old Testament a vindication of pagan pieties, and devoted much of his literature toward identifying Greek philosophical conceptions in Judaism in order to reconcile the two. The method proved effective: Numenius, a Greek philosopher writing a century after Philo, famously asked, "What is Plato, but Moses speaking Attic Greek?"<sup>19</sup>

In any event, the Jews of Jesus' time shared a culture similar to that of their Hellenistic neighbors. Although they remained a distinctive people, and were strongly disliked in certain regions, Jews could be found in high places of society throughout the Empire. They spoke Greek, read ancient literature, and their children received classical educations. It's plausible that Philo's literary endeavors were not only meant to benefit Greeks, but also his fellow Hellenized Jews.

The hypothetical "pure Semitic Christianity" necessary to support Harnack's thesis never existed, nor did Christianity preempt a pro-

17. Notable exceptions include Origen and Jerome. Both were influential Christian exegetes and translators who held the original Hebrew in high regard and treated it as the spiritual and hermeneutical basis for all other translations of the Scriptures.

18. We have no reason to think Jesus and Philo ever met.

19. Clement, *Stromateis*, trans. by John Ferguson (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 1.150.4.

gram to Hellenize its Jewish roots, which, as shown, had already begun in the Church's absence. Finally, because Jews in many respects shared a culture with the rest of the Empire, the transition from Jewish to Gentile leadership was not as dramatic as we might imagine, culturally-speaking.

Still, becoming heirs to Hellenistic culture had consequences for the Church. After Constantine converted in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, becoming the first Christian emperor, the new religion spread to every corner of the Empire. By the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century, Christians could be found in every strata of society, and the faith had gone a long way towards appropriating the dominant culture of pagan Rome. Over the

course of the next two centuries, time would be converted through the Christian calendar, and space through urban renewal projects concentrating typographically on holy sites.<sup>20</sup> Rome had become a Christian version of its former self. Many could not resist the temptation to equate the Church and its commission to make disciples of all nations with Rome's ambition to conquer and establish peace throughout the known world. Henry Chadwick writes:

It is possible, therefore, to speculate that Christianity achieved its success in the empire in part because it answered best to the empire's need for a universal religion with which it could identify itself. There are Christian writers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century who assume without discussion that 'Roman' and 'Christian' are almost synonymous terms.<sup>21</sup>

Since its birth, Christianity had been compelled to account for itself. Our question—What is Christianity?—was the same one

troubling the early Church when it was surrounded by critics. On one flank were the Greeks; on the other, the Jews; and from within, the Gnostics. Christianity was defined through a fiery, centuries-long process of objection and defense. She was a controversial point of intersection across multiple cultures and languages in Rome's diverse and pluralistic society. It is difficult to find another religion with comparable beginnings. However, quite early in her development, the Church became distinct from both Judaism and Hellenism. She belongs, ultimately, to neither. Rather, both belong in her.

Couched in an amiable culture, this understanding was under threat. Many noted figures, including Ambrose and Augustine, would retaliate in writing, to great effect. Benedict of Nursia would found monas-

20. The repurposing of the Pantheon was a part of this project.

21. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 73.



PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA, BY UNKNOWN (1584)

teries, thereby reasserting the early Christian model of a life devoted to prayer and spiritual practice. However, perhaps the best retaliation was the Great Commission itself. As missionaries penetrated into the neighboring barbarian tribes, the synthesis of Roman imperialism and Christianity broke down. No new program was begun; Christians merely repeated with hostile tribes what had won them the Empire. Gregory I, writing from the late-5<sup>th</sup> century, instructed missionaries to adapt both pagan temples and pagan holy days to Christian usage:

The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there. For if these temples are well-built, they must be purified from the worship of demons and dedicated to the service of the true God.<sup>22</sup>

In this manner, the missionaries to the Germanic tribes were following the practice widely current in the days when the Roman Empire was being converted.

Boniface, dubbed the Apostle of the Germans,<sup>23</sup> was among the first missionaries to the Germanic tribes. A tale left to us by Willibald recalls Boniface and his retinue coming across a tree held sacred by the Germans called Thor's Oak. Despite its extraordinary size, Boniface took an axe to the base and felled it. But instead of disposing of the wood, he used it to construct a church for the tribe. This may serve as a second church-themed analogy for the Christian appropriation of pagan piety. Here, the old pagan religion is a sort of raw material with which the Church may be built. More than any other analogy, this one might be closest to the view of the early Church.

## CHRISTIANITY AS THE EXPECTATION OF THE NATIONS

Let's now turn to the intellectual side of the issue, which is the heart of Harnack's thesis. To be clear, we are distinguishing the intellectual

22. Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. by Leo Sherley-Price (New York: Barnes & Nobel Books, 1993), 1.30.

23. A title comparable to Paul's "the Apostle of the Gentiles."

from the cultural much as we would the essential from the incidental. For the purposes of this essay, we are not concerned with the accidental and general limitations of language when tasked with the burden of communicating divine revelation; rather, we turn our eyes toward a choice set of philosophically-charged words that were used to articulate key Church doctrines. Even if we can dismiss the idea that Hellenistic influence is a corruption, is it possible that it *confines* Christian doctrine?



ST. PAUL DELIVERING THE AREOPAGUS SERMON IN ATHENS, BY RAPHAEL (1515)

IN FACT, WE COULD DESCRIBE ALMOST EVERY EARLY HERESY AS A VERSION OF CHRISTIANITY THAT DID NOT TRANSFIX ITSELF SUFFICIENTLY ON GOD'S SELF-DISCLOSURE, BUT INSTEAD SLID TOO FAR INTO EITHER HELLENISM OR JUDAISM.

Harnack describes the dogma formulated by the early Church as "in its conception and development a work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel."<sup>24</sup> By this, he does not refer to the historical accident that the first Church doctrines were developed in the Greek language (a mere consequence of pagan conversions), but to the more insidious notion that essential doctrines presume a pre-existing philosophical framework native only to Hellenistic cultures. This argument has teeth. The clinch is that it does indeed appear that the early theologians deliberately drew upon the riches of philosophical traditions in order to articulate official Church doctrine.

Take, for example, the Greek *homoousios*. This word appears in the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.), often translated as "essence" in the line: "We believe...in Jesus Christ... begotten not created, of the same *essence* [*homoousios*] as the Father..." This word is

a compound of *ousia* (i.e., "being, essence, nature") and *homo* (i.e., "same, identical"), so it literally means "of the same nature." Originally, this was a philosophical term used by both Plato and Aristotle to describe being and existence. In fact, Aristotle laid out several important technical meanings for the word, so naturally when determining what it meant when used to relate the Son to the Father, the Church Fathers were obliged to cite Aristotle as an authority on proper use.

Gallons of blood and ink would be spilled over this word. Councils would be formed and churches divided over whether the Son had the same *ousia* as the Father, or just a similar *ousia*, or a totally different *ousia*.

24. Adolf von Harnack, *Judentum und Judenchristentum in Justins Dialog mit Trypho* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1931), I:20.

Could we describe this, then, as a *philosophical* debate? If so, then it was wildly unphilosophical. Citing Aristotle, a proper Greek would say an *ousia* was indivisible. If you suggested there could be two persons, but one *ousia*, he'd consider the statement nonsensical, like saying 1+1=1. In the process of applying philosophical categories to the God of the Gospel, the Church Fathers exercised Hellenism to the breaking point. In the Gospel of John, the writer borrows the term *Logos* (i.e., "Word") from the Stoics, who used it to mean the divine, animating, rational, and immaterial principle pervading the Universe. For the first four verses of the first chapter of his Gospel, John says nothing with which a Stoic philosopher would disagree. But he pushes the term forward until his Hellenic philosophy breaks down into a declaration of revelation: "And the [*Logos*] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory...."<sup>25</sup> John is not engaged in neologisms, nor can we accuse him of simply redefining terms in a manner that favors his position. Rather, any Stoic philosopher would have recognized John's usage of *Logos*. The Apostle does not believe he is altering the meaning, but simply announcing who the *Logos* is, and the manner in which He has revealed Himself—something the Stoics were unequipped to do.

Meanwhile, it was the heretics, not the orthodox, who covered in the safety of sensible, Hellenistic categories. In fact, we could describe almost every early heresy as a version of Christianity that did not transfix itself sufficiently on God's self-disclosure, but instead slid too far into either Hellenism or Judaism. The first apologists seldom wrote to a single demographic. Apologias and exhortations alternated between Greek and Jewish objections, since both needed to be answered for a thorough defense from heresy. Paul also depicts the Church in the center of two worlds, at once connecting them like a keystone connects two arches, but comfortable in neither one of them:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.<sup>26</sup>

Although used to articulate official doctrine, philosophy ultimately submitted to the revelation preserved in Apostolic teachings. The reverse of Harnack's thesis seems to be more accurate: It was Judaism and Hellenism, in light of a divine deposit, which were transformed, or, rather, converted.

While orthodox Christianity is not limited by Hellenistic categories, Hellenism remains indispensable for understanding key doctrinal developments in early Christianity. The claim that this is historically

25. John 1:14, ESV.

26. 1 Cor. 1:22-25, ESV.

accidental is not far from the mark, since the same claim can be made of the role of Judaism in salvation history. The trenchant question: Why did God reveal Himself to the Jews, and not some other tribe? Surely, God could have done so, if He had the mind to; and surely, given their history of broken covenants, God did not elect the Jews because they were worthier of divine revelation, or their language more fit for His spoken Word. The answer to this is unclear, but it is enough to say the early Church Fathers did not behold Hebrew culture and language as intrinsically holier than any other (a fact the polyglot Bible enduringly demonstrates). Yet at the same time, language and cultures are not interchangeable where divine revelation is concerned. God did not speak Hebrew because it was holy, but Hebrew was made holy because God spoke it. While this elevated the status of the original Hebrew Scriptures, it does not restrict the Word to its Jewish expression.

At this point in the argument, most Christian apologists are willing to lay down their pens, but a question still remains: How were the early Church Fathers so willing to seize on the contents of their Greek inheritance to build the Christian Church? To parallel it to a separate but contemporaneous issue, how is citing the pagan Plato, and normalizing his teachings in our doctrine, at all different from eating meat sacrificed to idols?

THE EARLY CHURCH FATHER  
INTERPRETED PAUL'S WORDS TO  
MEAN THAT IN EVERY SACRED  
TRADITION ARE TRACES OF THE  
KNOWLEDGE OF GOD, DERIVED  
FROM NATURE AND THE INNER  
TESTIMONY OF THE IMAGO DEI.

No early apologist spoke to just Jews or Greeks. As mentioned, the body of work produced by a single apologist was typically split down the middle between the two sets of Church critics. This was necessary because each side presented a different set of objections, but in a less obvious way, it was because each warranted a different mode of response.

Justin Martyr is our finest as well as one of our earliest examples. To the Greeks, he spoke as a Greek. He used philosophical arguments and demonstrated his knowledge of classical literature. To the Jews, however, he quoted blocks of Old Testament text, attempting to persuade them on the grounds of their own tradition. This disparity in approach should give us pause. Why should Justin believe engaging the Greeks, as it were, on their own turf, was at all adequate? Shouldn't he instruct them in the ancient Scriptures first (especially the Prophets), and bring them to faith by arguing Christ is the Messiah of fulfilled prophecy? Chronologically-speaking, the Jew knew the Scriptures first, then Christ. For the Greek, it was the other way around: First, he was introduced to the Apostolic teachings, and only secondly the Scriptures, as a sort of Jesus pre-history. Shouldn't the same sequence be prescribed for the Greek? Shouldn't Greeks, as it were, pass through Judaism before reaching Christianity?

Following the Apostle Paul, the early Church Fathers saw no need for this. The story of salvation, which concentrates on revelation, is not limited to Jewish history. The Scriptures repeatedly report pagan intersections with the story of God's chosen people, most notably the Magi in the nativity story. Although the Jews remain central in the biblical narrative, in the periphery we see glimpses which suggest God is active among other nations and peoples:

The sceptre shall not be taken away from Judah, nor a ruler from his thigh, till He come that is to be sent, and He shall be the expectation of nations.<sup>27</sup>

Among the early Church Fathers, this latter line became a proof text, summarizing the three major points of the Church's schematization of the appropriation of pagan piety, which Jaroslav Pelikan identifies succinctly as "the historic mission of Israel, the end of that mission with the coming of Jesus, and the place of Jesus as the divine answer to the aspirations of all the nations."<sup>28</sup> What we find among the Church Fathers is a willingness to adopt Hellenic philosophy as an affirmation of the Divine Logos in all mankind and a testament to the revelation of Christ as the universal way of salvation. Paul states:

For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal men and birds and animals and creeping things.<sup>29</sup>

27. Gen. 49:10, DRB.

28. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 56.

29. Rom. 1:20-23, ESV.

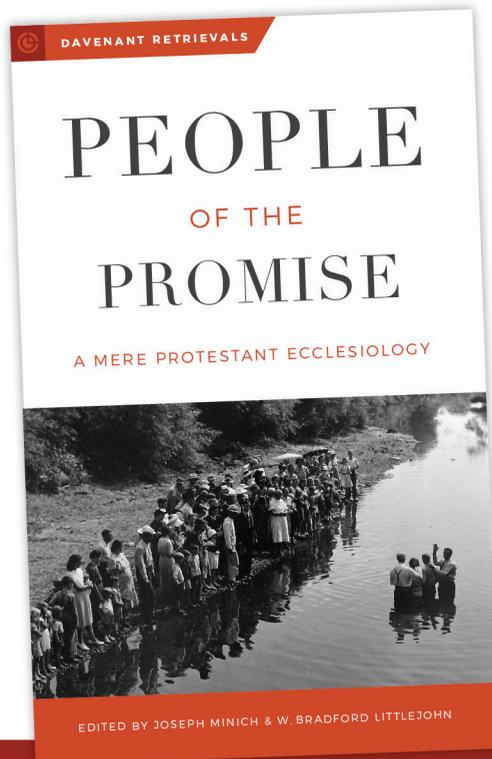
The early Church Father interpreted Paul's words to mean that in every sacred tradition are traces of the knowledge of God, derived from nature and the inner testimony of the Imago Dei. The pagan gods are, as it were, attempts to worship the invisible God without the assistance of divine revelation. In this very enterprise, philosophy tends to elevate something that is by nature below god to the status of God. Philosophy, in its attempts to be a guide toward human perfection, is therefore a manufacturer of idolatry, since it cannot escape beyond its own nature-based methods. Though able to arrive at much truth, its knowledge will always be partial. The task of the apologist, therefore, is not to make every pagan a Jew, but to present Christ as the perfecter of pagan piety.

And so Paul indicates the altar dedicated to the Unknown God in Athens, and declares, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."<sup>30</sup>

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30. Acts 17:23, ESV.



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*This spirited volume argues that the magisterial reformers in fact advanced a single, powerful, coherent, and biblical account of the essence of the church focused on the gospel. With remarkable restraint, the authors of People of the Promise decline to be distracted as they retrieve Protestantism's core ecclesiology.*—Fred Sanders, Biola University

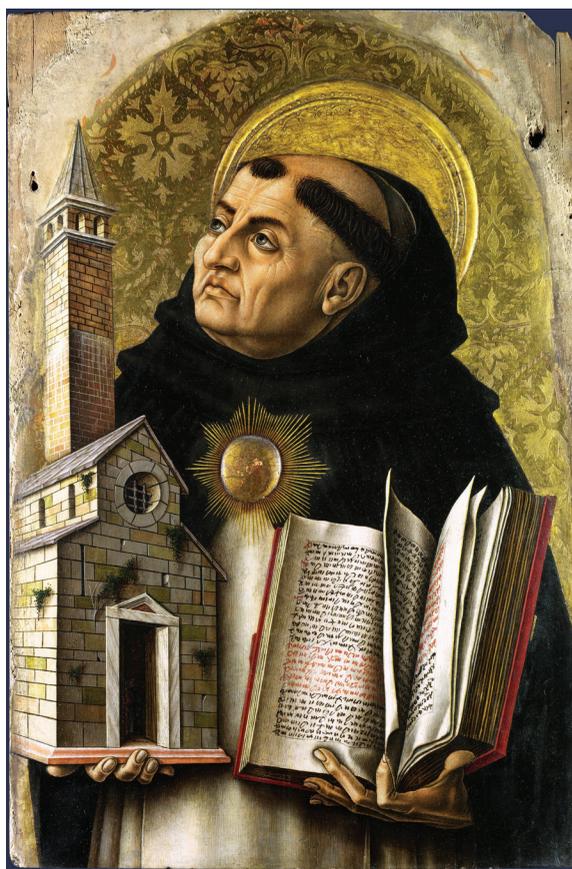
# THE GOAL OF PHILOSOPHY IN MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY

CHRISTOPHER CLEVELAND

The Christian philosophical contribution of the medieval church has been greatly misunderstood by the church at large. The common picture of medieval philosophy is that of monks sitting in ivory towers contemplating irrelevant and obscure topics such as “how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.” This image finds particular purchase in the imagination of evangelicals who see medieval philosophers as those who corrupted the church with pagan philosophy to the point that the Reformation became necessary. This, however, is a completely inaccurate picture of medieval philosophy. The great goal and purpose of medieval philosophy was not to pursue abstract topics for their own sake, nor was it to allow pagan philosophy to corrupt the Christian church. The purpose of medieval Christian philosophy was to articulate the truth of the Christian faith, and the implications of it for philosophy. The Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages is thus a magnificent achievement of the unity of faith and reason in the pursuit of the truth of God. It is the purpose of this essay to explore the way in which medieval philosophers pursued this great goal in the context of Christian theology.

## TO SEEK TRUTH WHERE IT IS FOUND

The church in the Middle Ages received a great inheritance of teaching and of writing from the Fathers, both Greek and Latin. The creeds, liturgies, sermons, and great works of the church Fathers were studied and used by clergy throughout Europe. But the medieval church also inherited a legacy of philosophical thought from the west that influenced the way that medieval Christians viewed reality. The most notable philosophical works available to medieval philosophers were the translations and commentaries of Boethius.



SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS, BY CARLO CRIVELLI. (1476)

Boethius (475/7-525/6) translated and commented upon Aristotle’s writings *Categories* and *On Interpretation*, as well as the *Isagoge* of Porphyry (itself an introduction to Aristotle’s *Categories*). These works provided the dominant source of Aristotle’s writings until the twelfth century, and were known as the *logica vetus*, or the old logic. Boethius, however, translated not only these works, but also the *Prior Analytics*, the *Topics*, and *Sophistical Refutations* of Aristotle (the remaining works of Aristotle’s *Organon* except for the *Posterior Analytics*). These treatises (known as the *logica nova*) became known to the West in the twelfth century and thus impacted philosophy from that time onward.<sup>1</sup>

A second major element of the inheritance that medieval philosophers received was from the writings of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), and with it, a Christian appreciation of Platonism. Although much of Plato’s corpus was lost to Europeans during the medieval era, Augustine was sympathetic to much that was present in Plato.<sup>2</sup> Augustine was one of the major influences upon the medieval church, and through his writings, many Platonic and Neoplatonic elements were transmitted to medieval theologians and philosophers as part of the heritage of Christian thought.

Thus medieval Christian philosophers began the era with a rich heritage of philosophical material inherited from previous ages. But the question may be asked, why did medieval Christian philosophers appear to have no problem with using pagan philosophical sources such as Aristotle? An eloquent answer to this

1. Richard Cross, *The Medieval Christian Philosophers: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2014), 4-5; Robert Pasnau, “The Latin Aristotle,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aristotle*, ed. Christopher Shields, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 665-66.

2. Richard Cross, *The Medieval Christian Philosophers*, 4-5.

question can be seen in Thomas Aquinas' (1225-1274) first chapter of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, as he is explaining the role of philosophy in knowing God. There he writes, "The Philosopher [Aristotle] himself establishes that first philosophy is the science of truth, not of any truth, but of that truth which is the origin of all truth, namely, which belongs to the first principle whereby all things are. The truth belonging to such a principle is, clearly, the source of all truth; for things have the same disposition in truth as in being."<sup>3</sup> The argument that Thomas is making here is that philosophy has value as it is the pursuit of truth. And it has particular value as it is pursues truth concerning God, the Creator of all things. To this end, philosophy was valuable as it explored the truth about God.

And yet, even as Aquinas quotes Aristotle, this very quotation follows immediately after he quotes John 18:37 "For this I came into the world, that I should give testimony to the truth." Thus for Aquinas and the other medieval philosophers, the Biblical pursuit of the truth of Christ and the philosophical science of truth of the philosophers were not contradictory, but complementary. Scripture and philosophy were united in the quest for truth.

This underlying presupposition is found in the first article of Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*, which asks the question, "Whether, besides philosophy, any further doctrine is required."<sup>4</sup> The assumption is that philosophy is the pursuit of truth, and so the question is whether a different type of pursuit of truth is necessary besides philosophy. The answer is to the affirmative that there must be a knowledge revealed which is beyond that known by human reason in philosophy, and that knowledge is divinely revealed truth.

And this very question hits upon the heart of the medieval Christian philosophical project: the value of philosophy came from how it was connected to divinely revealed truth. The philosophy of Aristotle and other ancient philosophers was of value as it was true. And if it was true, then it was to be connected to the divinely revealed truth of the Christian faith. And thus a work of systematization and harmonization was necessary in order to reconcile the teaching of pagan philosophers with the Christian faith.

3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), lib. 1 cap. 1 n. 5.

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.1, art. 1.

This work of harmonization and systematization came as Christian teachers began to comment upon the work of the philosophers. Following in the footsteps of Boethius, numerous Christian theologians began to teach and comment upon the writings of Aristotle and the other major works of philosophy current in the medieval era. Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham, among a multitude of others, taught and commented upon the text of Aristotle's works. In doing this, they not only taught the works of the ancient philosophers, but they also made them their

own, developing their own interpretations of these writings that would be consistent with the Christian faith. In Thomas' prologue to his *Commentary upon the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, we see an attempt at harmonizing philosophy with theology. Thomas notes that there is one science or discipline which is the "mistress of all the others," one which alone can lay claim to the name of wisdom. Of this science, Thomas states, "In accordance with the three classes of objects...It is called divine science or theology inasmuch as it considers the aforementioned substances [God and intellectual substances]. It is called metaphysics inasmuch as it considers being and the attributes which naturally accompany being....And it is called first philosophy inasmuch as it considers the first causes of things."<sup>5</sup> Thus for Thomas and the medieval theologians, theology and philosophy were united in the divine 'science' of truth.

And in this great project of systematization, there was a need to reconcile not only philosophical insights with revealed doctrine, but also the ideas of the great Christian teachers with each

other. Indeed, this was one of the major tasks of the earliest philosophers and theologians of the Middle Ages. Abelard's (1079-1142) *Sic et Non* (*Yes and No*) presented seemingly contradictory teachings of the Fathers on various issues as a way of approaching the doctrines of the faith. In a similar fashion, Peter Lombard's (1100-1160) *Four Books of the Sentences* presented a systematic approach to the teachings of the Church Fathers on various issues. Lombard's work became the standard theology textbook for the rest of the Middle Ages up until the era of the Reformation. It was in this context that theologians synthesized Christian doctrine with philosophical truth, often in commentaries upon Lombard's *Sentences*.

5. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. John P. Rowan (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1995), xxxi.



PETER LOMBARDO (1158)

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARISTOTLE  
AND OTHER ANCIENT  
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OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.

## FAITH AND REASON

One of the most significant features of medieval theology was the way in which faith and reason were united. This, however, is often misunderstood. The medievals did not subordinate Christian faith to fallen reason. Rather, the medieval mindset sought to present the logicity and reasonableness of revealed truth. One of the most important aspects of the medieval Christian project was that confidence was not in the ability of human reason, but in the intelligibility of revealed doctrine.

This is seen clearly in the writings of Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), and in his argument for the existence of God. The *Proslogion*, the work in which Anselm develops his famous ontological argument, is written from the perspective of a prayer. It has the theme that Anselm presents in the beginning, “I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order that I may understand.”<sup>6</sup> This in many ways was the theme of the medieval Christian philosophical project. Anselm seeks to demonstrate through logic and argument what he believes by faith.

This culminates in his argument for the existence of God, as the One greater-than-which-nothing-can-be-thought. This understanding of God is known even by the ‘fool’ who says in his heart, “there is no God.” This God, Anselm argues, cannot exist in the intellect alone, for then there would be one that could be thought greater: One who existed in reality as well. And thus, the God who is that-greater-than-which-nothing-can-be-thought exists not only in the intellect, but in reality as well. Anselm goes on to argue that this God is none other than the Triune God revealed in Scripture: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Anselm’s optimism about the intelligibility of divinely revealed truth is mirrored in the thought of Richard of St. Victor (1110-1173), who argued that the Trinity itself could be proven. In his work *De Trinitate (On the Trinity)*, Richard argued that God could not be one Person alone, for then He could not love another as much as Himself. Thus, in order for the fullness of divine love to be expressed, it is necessary for God to be more than one Person. But in order for them to possess the fullness of divine blessedness, it is necessary for two divine Persons to be united in the love of another, and to share in the bond of divine love for another divine person. Richard’s argument makes clear that he is seeking to argue logically for that which is known through faith. Indeed, he makes a statement to this effect

6. Anselm, *Proslogion in Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) cap. 1.

in the prologue of his work: “Let us always strive, within the limits of what is right and possible, to comprehend by reason that which we hold by faith.”<sup>7</sup>

What is interesting in these arguments by Anselm and Richard of St. Victor is that neither author can conceive of any rational person rejecting them. The truth is so clearly self-evident that it cannot be denied. Anselm states that “if I did not want to believe that you existed, I should nevertheless be unable not to understand it.”<sup>8</sup> Richard argues that “the witness we receive from everywhere, effectively confirming the Trinity, appears to be so valid and full of truth that if someone were not convinced by such a certain demonstration, he would certainly look like a madman.”<sup>9</sup> And these statements express such a confidence, not in the rational capabilities of the ‘fool’ or the ‘madman,’ but in the overwhelming truth of God.

### ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THE MEDIEVAL CHRISTIAN PROJECT WAS THAT CONFIDENCE WAS NOT IN THE ABILITY OF HUMAN REASON, BUT IN THE INTELLIGIBILITY OF REVEALED DOCTRINE.

Later theologians and philosophers expressed a greater pessimism regarding man’s ability to accept or rationally understand these clear truths. Thomas Aquinas, for example, notes that “human reason is very deficient in things concerning God. A sign of this is that philosophers in their researches, by natural investigation, into human affairs, have fallen into many errors, and have disagreed amongst themselves.”<sup>10</sup> Despite this fact, these theologians still developed arguments for the existence of God.

In the thirteenth century, after the whole of Aristotle’s corpus had come into currency in the west, the arguments were developed somewhat differently, utilizing Aristotelian language and logic. Thomas Aquinas developed Five Ways by which the existence of God could be demonstrated. Thomas’ first way is from motion, noting that everything is put in motion, from a state of potentiality to a state of actuality. Thus there must be an unmoved Mover, who is pure act, who moves all other things. The second way is that we see intermediate causes in the world, and these are not the ultimate causes of all things. Therefore, there must be a First Cause that is the Cause of all other things. The third way is that it is possible for things to be or not to be. They are contingent. But if that is the case with everything, then nothing would have come into existence. Therefore, there must be something necessary, for which it is not possible not to exist. And this is God. The fourth way is that we see perfections in the world in grades. Some things are greater or less good, or noble, or otherwise excellent. But there must be a being that

7. Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity*, trans. Ruben Angelici (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), Prologue.

8. Anselm, *Proslogion*, cap. 4.

9. Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity*, lib. 3, XX.

10. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-IIae, q. 2, art. 4, resp.

possesses the fullness of these perfections, which is their Cause and Origin. And this is God. The fifth way is from the governing of the world. We see that certain things in nature lack intelligence, and yet they move toward a specific end or goal. There must be some intelligence moving these things to their goal, and this is God.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas' Five Ways serve not only to demonstrate God's existence to the unbeliever. They also served a structural purpose, in providing prolegomenal principles to which Thomas would return again and again throughout the *Summa Theologiae*. The key principles of God as pure act of being without any potentiality, and the creature as a mixed composition of potentiality and act, is vital for understanding Thomas' doctrines of predestination, grace, and the incarnation.

John Duns Scotus (1266-1308) presented his argument for the existence of God in a philosophical framework. His argument is highly complex and intricate, thus moving the philosophical discussion into further depth. Yet even these writings are presented in a Christian context, and Scripture is quoted in them at length. Scotus' *De Primo Principio*, (*Of the First Principle*) begins with a brief meditation upon God's revelation of Himself in Exodus 3:14 "I am who I am." Scotus essentially argues that in a series of effects, where each effect is necessarily dependent upon its previous cause, it is necessary that there be a First Cause which is responsible for them all. Otherwise, one would have an infinite series of causes, which is impossible. But Scotus' argument is more subtle than this, in that he states that if such a being is possible, then such a being is necessary. "It follows that an efficient cause which is first in the unqualified sense of the term can exist of itself, for what does not actually exist of itself is incapable of existing of itself."<sup>12</sup> Scotus' argument mirrors in some ways Anselm's, as it argues from the very concept of God self-existing in Himself to the reality of it. Yet it also

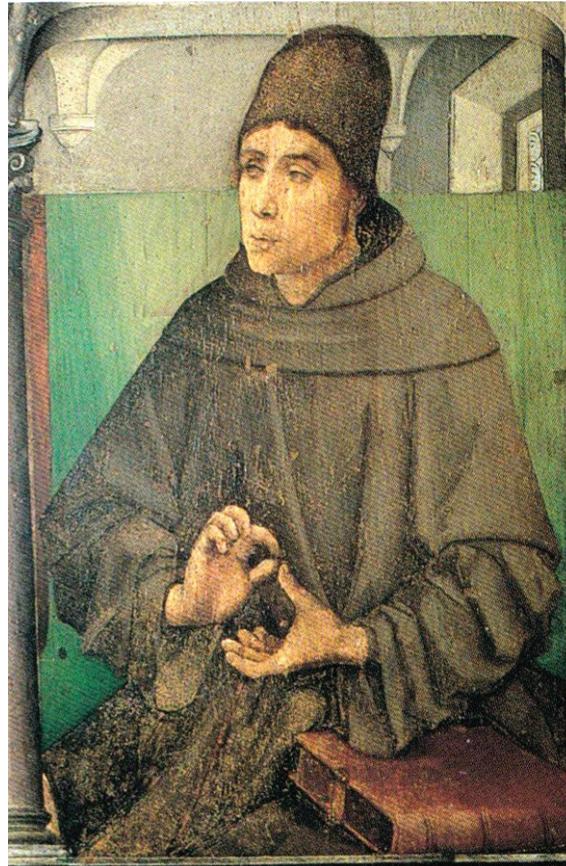
reflects the Aristotelian language and conceptions of causality, as was the case with the arguments of Aquinas.

The scholastic arguments for the existence of God were attempts to explore the logicity of something that was known through Scripture, creation, and reason. The varied approaches demonstrate how

they sought to find rational approaches to truth that would be unable to be argued against by the unbeliever. And in each of these, they sought to argue for the God who was known in Scripture. The arguments for God's existence represent an attempt to pursue, as far as possible, the rational nature of Christian teaching concerning the existence of God.

The Christian scholastic philosophers and theologians of the medieval era pursued the unity of faith and reason in their writings. The question of the relationship between faith and reason came about to a great extent due to the greater currency of the works of Aristotle in the West. During the eleventh century, various translations began to circulate of Aristotle's other works beyond the logical treatises of the *Organon*. James of Venice translated the *Physics*, *De anima*, and the majority of the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle. However, Aristotle's writings gained greater currency in Europe not only because of translations from Greek into Latin, but also because of translations and commentaries upon Aristotle's work from the Arab world. Michael Scot translated the *De anima* and the *Metaphysics* from Arabic, along with the commentary upon the *De anima* by Averroes (1123-1198), an Islamic commentator of Aristotle.<sup>13</sup>

As these translations and Arabic commentaries entered Europe, so did the ideas of both Aristotle and his Arabic interpreters. These works became so significant that Averroes himself became known in Europe as *The Commentator*. Various new controversies arose because of these interpretations, such as the ideas of the eternity of the world and the unity of the intellect. Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle argued that there was a singular intellect for all



SCOTUS, BY JUSTUS VAN GENT (CIRCA 1472-1476)

THE ARGUMENTS FOR GOD'S  
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EXISTENCE OF GOD.

11. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.2, art. 3, resp.

12. John Duns Scotus, *De Primo Principio*, 3.18-3.19; Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20-21.

13. Richard Cross, *The Medieval Philosophers*, 3, 11.

of mankind. In this, everyone was able to learn and to know. The intellect was not portioned to each and every person, but was universal, and separated from the body and from matter.

This idea influenced European thinkers such as Siger of Brabant, who argued for the unity of the human intellect based upon arguments derived from Aristotle. This idea posed a threat to a Christian understanding of the soul, as it denied the individual intellect which would be saved or judged by God. Both Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus responded to the Averroists on the unity of the intellect in their respective writings *De Unitate Intellectus contra Averroem* (*On the Unity of the Intellect against Averroes*), and *De Unitate Intellectus contra Averroistas* (*On the Unity of the Intellect against the Averroists*). Thomas argues in particular that if this were true, then what any one person would know, the whole of humanity would know. The views of the Averroists were condemned by the Bishop of Paris in 1277, affirming that reason was always to be subordinate to the truths of the Scriptures. In this condemnation of 1277 it was written,

For they say that these things are true according to philosophy but not according to the Catholic faith, as if there were two contrary truths and as if the truth of Sacred Scripture were contradicted by the truth in the sayings of the accursed pagans, of whom it is written, *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise* [I Cor. 1:19; cf. Isa. 29:14], inasmuch as true wisdom destroys false wisdom. Would that such students listen to the advice of the wise man when he says: *If you have understanding, answer your neighbor; but if not, let your hand be upon your mouth, lest you be surprised in an unskillful word and be confounded* [Eccles. 5:14].<sup>14</sup>

Thus the controversy of Averroism demonstrated that reason and the teachings of pagan philosophers could never be allowed to contradict the truth of Sacred Scripture. Scripture was to be the standard by which both faith and philosophy were to be judged.

The Christian philosophers of the middle ages sought the unity of faith and reason, and they sought to argue rationally for what is revealed through divine revelation. This is seen perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* of Thomas Aquinas, where he argues repeatedly for philosophical points, only to immediately follow them up with Scripture. Thomas notes that he is seeking to present the truth of the Christian faith, and that in doing this, he will use arguments of natural reason, despite the fact that it is flawed in divine things. He then notes his method: “while we are investigating some given truth, we shall also show what errors are set aside by it; and we shall likewise show how the truth that we come to know by

14. “Selections from the Condemnations of 1277,” in *Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary*, ed. Gyula Klima, Fritz Allhoff, and Jayprakash Vaidya (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 180.

demonstration is in accord with the Christian religion.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, he proceeds using logic and philosophical reasoning, and then explains how that truth is consistent with what is believed in the Christian faith. This process leads him to the fullness of truth in book four, where he deals explicitly with the truths of Christian teaching that are known solely through faith.

Thus in the pursuit of the goal of the unity of faith and reason, Thomas comes to a boundary where certain truths are known only through divine revelation. Perhaps the most famous example of the division between faith and reason in the medieval era is upon the question of the eternity of the world. Aristotle had argued in his *Physics* (VIII, 251a8-b10) that the world must always have been in motion, and

so it could not have had a beginning. This idea became popularized in the West through the commentaries and writings of Averroes (1126-1198), the Islamic commentator of Aristotle. St. Thomas argues that it cannot be logically or reasonably proven that the world had a beginning. This is a truth that is known only through divine revelation.<sup>16</sup> Here there is a division between faith and reason, with Thomas of necessity affirming the truth of the faith, but acknowledging the inability to argue for it through reason.

St. Bonaventure (1217-1274), however, believed that it could be demonstrably proven to be incorrect that the world did not have a beginning. In his *Commentary upon the Sentences* (d.1, p.1, a.1, q.2) and in his *Hexaemeron* (VI, 4) he argued for the impossibility of an infinite world based upon the impossibility of a numerical infinite. For both of these authors, it was Scripture that ruled and regulated philosophy, presenting truths which were to be believed, despite philosophical arguments to the contrary. Scripture was absolutely necessary for the medieval philosophical project, as it made it distinctly Christian.

## EXEGESIS OF SCRIPTURE ESSENTIAL FOR THIS PROJECT

The medieval philosophers received a great deal of philosophical material from ancient sources, particularly the writings of Aristotle. But there remained one overriding source that guided and regulated the Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages: Scripture itself. As philosophy in the Middle Ages was done by Christians, it was ruled and regulated by Sacred Scripture. There were some conclusions that were drawn of necessity by virtue of the teachings of the faith, such that there was only one God, and that the world had a beginning. And there were some paradigms that contradicted sacred doctrine, and so could not be adapted to Christian teaching. Furthermore, Scripture itself provided the inspiration for all true and proper philosophical teaching. Etienne Gilson expresses this point eloquently:

15. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, lib. 1 cap. 2 n. 5.

16. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, (Ia, q. 46, art. 2, resp.)



ILLUSTRATION OF DANTE'S PARADISO BY GIOVANNI DI PAOLO (CIRCA 1442-1450)

In order to know what God is, Moses turns to God. He asks His name, and straightway comes the answer: *Ego sum qui sum, Ait: sic dices filiis Israel; qui est misit me ad vos* (Exod. Iii. 14). No hint of metaphysics, but God speaks, *causa finita est*, and Exodus lays down the principle from which henceforth the whole of Christian philosophy will be suspended. From this moment it is understood once and for all that the proper name of God is Being and that, according to the word of St. Ephrem, taken up again later by St. Bonaventure, this name denotes His very essence.<sup>17</sup>

The teaching of Scripture, in this case, the name of God declared unto Moses, "I am who I am," is the foundation for Christian philosophy. This particular point is fundamental for all of the arguments for God's existence that the medieval philosophers made: God is Himself existence, and needs nothing in order to exist. For this reason, He can be the First Cause, the Necessary Being and that-greater-than-which-cannot-be-thought. These in turn were foundational principles for the rest of the Christian philosophical and theological systems of the scholastics.

Scripture provided a centralizing effect upon philosophy in the medieval era. The medieval philosophical systems were not a mere development of Aristotelian thought, but were rather deep and rich systems which united all truth around the central teachings of the Christian faith. The *Summae* of Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus, and the commentaries on the *Sentences* by numerous other scholastic theologians express this point clearly. The Christian faith constitutes the core of the system, and philosophical language and concepts are used

17. Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 51.

to articulate these truths in numerous areas, from the existence and attributes of God to the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, to the nature of the incarnation of Christ. These truths were defended and articulated with the use of philosophical language and logic.

And the reason why many of these theologians and philosophers were able to develop philosophy in this way is because many of them were skilled exegetes. Abelard, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure, among a multitude of others, all wrote commentaries

upon Scripture. This was partly due to the fact that in the curriculum for preparation to become a teacher of theology, one had to study Scripture before studying the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard.<sup>18</sup> Their exegetical work clearly influenced their understanding of philosophy, as it allowed Aristotle and other writers to be interpreted in a way that would not contradict sacred doctrine.

And the great philosophical project finds its apex as it leads unto the goal of created existence: contemplation of God that leads to the beatific vision. Thomas Aquinas explains that "Final and perfect

happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence."<sup>19</sup> This beatific vision is the goal of the Christian life, as one seeks to behold by faith the nature of the Triune God. Contemplation and meditation upon Scripture and its teachings and its implications lead to this final and blessed goal. And this was the purpose of Christian philosophy in the Middle Ages: to explore the implications of Christian teaching and sacred Scripture by means of the tools

18. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 248.

19. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 3, art. 8, resp.

found in philosophy, and the truths therein, so that one is led deeper into the truths of the Christian faith. And thus one is led ultimately to the intellectual vision of the Triune God, through Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Here the words of St. Anselm in the conclusion of the *Proslogion* are most fitting as the goal of the Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages:

Let me receive what thou dost promise through thy truth, that my joy may be full. O God of truth, I ask that I may receive, that my joy may be full. Meanwhile, let my mind meditate upon it, let my tongue speak of it. Let my heart love it, let my tongue dis-

course on it. Let my soul hunger for it, let my flesh thirst for it, let my whole substance desire it, until I enter into the joy of my Lord, who is the triune and one God, blessed forever. Amen.<sup>20</sup>

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 20. Anselm, *Proslogion*, cap. xxvi.



# ON PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

PETER MARTYR VERMIGLI

*This has been excerpted from the Vermigli's Introduction to his Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (1556).*

Now I can easily proceed to the exposition of Aristotle, except that a certain hindrance must first be removed. It consists of what Paul said in Colossians 2: "Beware lest anyone prey on you through philosophy."<sup>1</sup> Truly, with such words he seems to frighten Christians away from the study of philosophy, but I am sure that if you grasp the meaning of the apostle's statement properly, you will not be disturbed. Since true philosophy derives from the knowledge of created things, and from these propositions reaches many conclusions about the justice and righteousness that God implanted naturally in human minds, it cannot therefore rightly be criticized: it is the work of God and could not be enjoyed by us without his special contribution. But Paul censured that philosophy that is corrupted by human invention and by the bitter disputes of philosophers. If they had remained within limits and had discussed only what creaturely knowledge has revealed about God and nature by the most certain reasoning, they would not have strayed from the truth. Hence, the apostle says: "By this philosophy," that is, by exegesis "empty deceit";<sup>2</sup> he then adds: "which has its origin in human tradition and is inspired by cosmic forces." That the universe is eternal was taught by human beings, not by lower creatures. Nature did not show that the universe is composed of the random conjunction of atoms; this was conceived by empty speculation. Stoic fate and impassibility, the perpetual doubt of the Academics, the motionless and idle deities of the Epicureans—who would question that such ideas are "empty deceit"? They dreamed of community of property, of wives traded openly, of pleasure as the highest good, and of gods worshipped in the manner of the vulgar; yet they did not learn such things by any natural illumination or [8] practical principles known in themselves by sure reasoning. Surely these things are poisons and corruptions by which the devil, through evil men, perverts that gift of God, philosophy. This polluted and spoiled philosophy is what Paul wishes to avoid.

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 1. Col.2:8

2. "per exegesis." Vermigli mixes Latin and Greek to render this phrase from Col. 2:8.

Now we must see how what we have so far discussed agrees with holy scripture. There also we have active and contemplative knowledge. The things in which we believe and that are contained in the articles of faith pertain to contemplation (*theoretikon*) since we perceive them but do not create them, and although they are not included within knowledge they are nonetheless understood. What is contained in laws, deliberations, and exhortations should be referred to as practical knowledge (*praktikon*). So far these matters agree, yet they also differ, for in philosophy the active precedes the contemplative because, as it is said, we can contemplate neither God nor nature by human power unless our emotions are first at rest.<sup>3</sup> But in scripture, speculation occurs first, inasmuch as we must first believe and be justified through faith. Afterwards good works follow, which occur more abundantly the more frequently we are renewed by the Holy Spirit. That is what Paul shows in his letters, for first he deals with doctrines, only afterwards coming to moral instruction and principles for living. So also the children of Israel were first gathered in Egypt under the faith of one God the Deliverer. Afterwards in the desert, they received laws that refer to practical knowledge. And in the Decalogue the same order was kept. First it is said: "I am the lord your God," which belongs to faith or theoretical knowledge. Afterwards there follow precepts that look to the works commanded by God. The cause of this difference is that human contemplation is gained by study and diligent reflection; therefore moderation of emotion is required. But what we believe is received by the inspiration of God; therefore, there is no need of those preparations. According to human reason, men should first do righteous deeds before there is justification. But the order of divine sanctification is established far otherwise; first we believe, and afterwards are justified, and then the powers of our minds are restored by the Holy Spirit and by grace, and finally just and honest deeds follow.

The goal of philosophy is that we reach that beatitude or happiness that can be acquired in this life by human powers, while the goal of Christian devotion is that the image in which we are created in righteousness and

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 3. *Eth. nic.* 10.7-8: contemplation reduces bodily necessities to a minimum, as close as possible to the impassive deity whose likeness is sought.

holiness of truth be renewed in us, so that we grow daily in the knowledge of God until we are led to see him as he is, with face uncovered. From [9] these *Ethica nicomachea* we will not learn about the remission of sins, about fear and faith towards God, nor justification through faith, nor yet about Christ and similar things. Such matters are brought to light by God's will; they cannot be produced by natural knowledge from anything created. We do not deny that it often happens that the same things are commended in these *Ethica nicomachea* as are commanded by god in holy scripture. In such cases the topic is the same but not its form, properties, and principles; for in these the rationale is different, as are the properties and principles, just as water from rain and from a spring is the same in substance while its powers, properties, and principles are far different. For one comes from the heat of heaven and the clouds and cold of the middle regions of the air, while the other is drawn through the subterranean channels of the earth and from the sea and is so filtered that it comes out sweet—or else by converting air to water from the cold of the place where the spring arises. Thus what Christians do is done by the impulse of the Holy Spirit of God, for those who act according to the Holy Spirit are sons of God. What philosophers do about ethics is done under the guidance of human reason; they are urged to action according to what they judge to be honest and correct. But for Christians, it is because God judges so. The former think that they improve and perfect themselves if they act in this way; the latter think that if they act it is because one should be obedient to the divine. The former believe in themselves, the latter in God and the words of the law that he himself gave. The former labor from self-love while the latter are driven by the love of the one God. From these many differences it happens that substantially the very same thing may be pleasing to God or damned by his judgment. Let this suffice on the one hand and human philosophy on the other.

Let us return to the point from which we digressed, namely, whether this discipline is repugnant to piety. I say that it is no more against it than astrology or the nautical or military arts, or else fishing and hunting, and

also knowledge of human law that everyone understands as necessary for public administration. Jurisprudence forms its own laws and institutions out of propositions concerning the justice and goodness innate in our minds; moral philosophers analyze the same propositions and probe them most closely, so that not only might they themselves know them thoroughly, but also transmit them to others with great alacrity. Thus among the Greeks wisdom is called *sophia* as if it meant “clarity” and “wise” is *sophos* as if it meant “clear,” no doubt because it clarifies its subject matter and makes it obvious. Therefore those learned in the law may easily regard their own science as part of philosophy, even if concerning virtue, honesty, and justice, they pass less severe judgments through their legislation [10] than philosophers do in their disputes. For example, philosophy detests ingratitude in any human condition, but the laws do not punish it unless committed by children against parents or by freedmen against their patrons. Human laws compel no one to give his goods to the needy; but philosophy commends liberality and generosity towards all. What more should be said? In praise of this kind of philosophy Cicero exclaimed in *Tusculanus* 5: “O philosophy, thou guide of life, O thou explorer of virtue and expeller of vice! Without thee what could have become not only of me but of the life of man altogether? Thou hast given birth to cities, thou hast called scattered human beings into the bond of social life, thou hast united them first of all in joint habitations, then in wedlock, then in the ties of common literature and speech, (thou hast discovered law), thou hast been the teacher of morality and order,” and so forth.<sup>4</sup> Everyone acknowledges how splendid it is to know the power of herbs, rocks, metals, and medicines, and we do not deny this in the least. But does it not follow from all this that it is a worthwhile faculty by which human acts, choices, arts, methods, skills, virtues, and vices are to be perceived? What could be more noble than to know oneself?—and this we know in the first place through philosophy.

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4. Cicero *Tusc.* 2.5.2.

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