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Christianity and Philosophy: A Changing and Uncertain Relationship

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Abstract: In this brief historical meditation on the relation between Christianity and philosophy, I consider changing conceptions of philosophy—from a conception of philosophy as having been *replaced* by the Christian faith up to a conception of what I term ‘Westphalian philosophy,’ which sees natural reason, unaided by revelation or the *magisterium* of the Church and as utilized in contemporary academic philosophy, as (capable of) yielding the essential, rational core of theistic belief and morality.

As Aristotle might have said—but, so far as I know, did not—‘philosophy’ is said in many ways. In perhaps the broadest sense of the term, it is the fundamental conceptual framework by which we attempt to understand and to live in this world and, according to some philosophical doctrines, the world to come. Or, in the more poetical words of Plato’s Socrates, “the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.”¹ In this sense, I assume that it is virtually tautologous that a truly Christian philosopher, wherever he or she finds himself, will affirm and practice ‘Christian philosophy’. In a more restricted but ancient Western sense of the term ‘philosophy’ (i.e., the wisdom of the pagan ancients) some Church fathers such as St. Augustine regarded Christianity as the rightful heir, successor, correction, and completion of philosophy. But from a rather less irenic perspective, ‘being a philosopher’ in late antiquity could, in the words of G. R. Evans, represent “a practical alternative to being a Christian.”² Tertullian, in the late-second and early-third century A.D., represents a strain of Christian thought that holds the Faith to be fundamentally at odds with philosophy. He famously and rhetorically asks, “What, therefore, has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What the philosophical

¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a2-3 (trans. G. M. A. Grube).

² G. R. Evans, *Philosophy and Theology in the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 1993), 3.

academies with the Churches. What the heretics with the Christians?”³

Evans proceeds to point out that, as Christianity became the dominant world-view in the West, “[p]hilosophy in the Middle Ages was largely an academic study, and chiefly confined in its scope to those themes and topics on which the surviving ancient textbooks provided some teaching.”⁴ And so it has largely remained. Yet, the place of philosophy in the medieval university was not entirely a clear and comfortable one. Despite the fact that some tuition in philosophy became a part of the Master of Arts curriculum, philosophy was not one of the liberal arts. And it was not one of the advanced degrees (which were theology, medicine, and law). It was within this context that yet another conception of philosophy developed: the *ancilla* (handmaiden) of theology. That is, philosophy came to be regarded as reasoning about metaphysical and theological ‘first things’ (and, perhaps, about moral matters) which is propaedeutic to study of the revealed truths of theology. Training in the sort of deductive reasoning employed in philosophy could also prove helpful in deriving the logical consequences of those revealed truths. Yet, from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and beyond, philosophy not infrequently re-assumed a role as adversary rather than handmaid of orthodox Christianity. Witness, for example, the condemnation by Bishop Tempier of Paris in 1277 of philosophical and theological theses supposedly advanced by some persons in the Faculty of Arts who wished, according to one interpretation, to oppose Christian orthodoxy with pagan (“secular”) philosophical doctrine

Subsequently, philosophy achieved a toe-hold in the modern university, but certainly not as the handmaid of theology. Rather, beginning with some ‘big name’ non-academic practitioners of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it eventually assumed the status of an academic discipline coordinate with but independent from the other so-called humanistic disciplines within the modern curriculum of liberal arts and sciences. I think that it is fair to say that, since the time of Immanuel Kant, most major philosophers have been academics. I believe that it is also true that most modern and contemporary philosophers (even the professed Christians) have regarded their discipline as distinct from theology—and certainly not as subservient to it. A similar assumption of ‘separate but equal’ has generally prevailed within the modern university, at least officially, with respect to the relation between philosophy and physics, biology, history, law and (more recently) between philosophy and sociology, anthropology, political science, linguistics, and literary criticism.

³Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7.9.

⁴Evans, 4.

In view of its curricular niche, it is easy to see why modern academic practitioners of philosophy have been motivated to develop their unique disciplinary turf, demarcating philosophy from the other arts and sciences, while at the same time adopting many assumptions thought to be generally appropriate to the practice and teaching of the arts and sciences in a modern secular university. But ‘philosophy’ in a sense that accords it a superordinate intellectual (and normative) status remains to cause trouble. If any discipline is widely recognized as possessing such a status in the contemporary world of the West, it is not philosophy but probably some combination of the natural sciences—what Aristotle would have termed ‘natural philosophy’ as opposed to ‘first philosophy’. Claims for a foundational or superordinate intellectual or normative status on behalf of contemporary academic philosophy are nowadays generally neither understood nor accepted by most academics (at least if those academics are not philosophers). Indeed, even the hint of such a conception of philosophy typically is either resented or found risible.⁵

The Christian who happens to be an academic philosopher and who is perhaps more sympathetic to a foundational conception of philosophy additionally confronts the ambiguous historical relation between philosophy and the Faith: should philosophy be regarded (and taught) as providing a range of “alternative[s] to being a Christian”? Or can the conception of philosophy as *ancilla* to the Faith be revived in an updated and less ‘sectarian’ form—a form that perhaps makes philosophy more the *domina* (mistress) than the *ancilla* (servant)? That is, can philosophy be brought on board as the objective application of natural reason to first things (and, perhaps, to moral matters) in such a way that its deliverances can serve as both a foundation of and preparation for the Faith?⁶

I refer to this latter option as the ‘Westphalian’ conception of philosophy. The Peace of Westphalia was a series of peace agreements signed in 1648, which ended the Thirty Years’ War and gave birth to the modern notion of sovereign nation-states. One consequence of the Peace was the granting of legal recognition to (most of) the various varieties of Christianity that emerged in Western Europe as a result of the Protestant Reformation. By

⁵ From the experience of over forty years, I can attest to the common criticism of philosophers, by other academics, as intellectually arrogant and given to hubris, particularly in their supposed tendency to pontificate about the foundation and basic principles of intellectual disciplines with respect to which they lack technical mastery.

⁶ Some such conception, I take it, is implied by the allusion to “philosophy as the study of general revelation” in the statement of the Project Purpose of the Christian Philosophers in the ‘Secular Academy’ project.

‘Westphalian philosophy,’ I connote an intellectual consequence of the Peace and of the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the development of the conception of natural reason that can establish the fundamental principles of morality in relation to a theistic (or deistic) metaphysics and (usually) the individual human survival of biological death with future punishments and rewards for moral/immoral behavior in this life.⁷ Crucially, Westphalian philosophy does not depend on the confessional, theological differences which the Peace of Westphalia was designed to bridge. And in the best Enlightenment tradition, it is an ahistorical conception of natural reason, doing its work and reaching its consequences quite independently from historical, cultural, or social contingencies.

I myself confess to a degree of skepticism concerning Westphalian philosophy. The working of ‘natural reason,’ unaided by special revelation, seems to me to be represented only by the range of doctrines concerning first things and morality that have been developed by those generally recognized as philosophically adept—particularly by those ‘major’ thinkers, from antiquity to the present, who have the (good?) fortune of being included in the philosophical canon. However, Westphalian philosophy remains as an important ideal for many Christians. This ideal is an essentially ahistorical conception of human reason as capable of establishing what are taken to be the moral and metaphysical fundamentals of Christianity without the need of ‘special revelation’ or the guidance (*magisterium*) of the Church. I do note that it seems to me to be a conception of philosophy that nowadays is largely limited to Christians within particular ecclesial traditions. But, of course, those who are committed to such a conception of philosophy might well regard this (purported) fact as a perhaps curious but essentially irrelevant sociological detail.

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