

PHILOSOPHY AS A HANDMAID OF THEOLOGY: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship and the important part philosophy plays in theology. Theology depends to a large extent on the philosophy of the people. This paper looks at the concept of philosophy, the concept of theology and the implication of philosophy in the development of theology. It therefore proposes that philosophy and theology are twin brotherhood – one cannot exist in isolation; each enables the other, taken together it makes a whole word of sense. The paper equally noted that though philosophy may be regarded as the handmaid of theology, yet, being a handmaid does not imply that philosophy is inferior or simply a mere servant to theology. After all, the two need each other in order to serve humanity properly. This study adopts a conceptual clarification of our discourse and engages in an analytic and critical appraisal of the subject matter.

Keywords: Philosophy, Theology, Handmaid, Relationship

Introduction

There has been an “age-old” debate among philosophers and theologians on the relationship between philosophy and theology, and most importantly, about their functions. Some say that without philosophy one cannot be a good theologian, in other words, philosophy is the handmaid of theology, while some say that theology does not need philosophy since they are like two poles apart. Some philosophers have even gone so far as to condemn theology as nonsensical and meaningless on the ground that its claims or propositions are unempirical, that is, that theological statements are unverifiable.

Consequently, the first impression of a novice in the field of theology or philosophy might be that there is no distinction between them other than that of preference. Although they occupy different departments in Universities, philosophers and theologians often deal with the same questions. They have similar methods of reasoning that they employ in their work. The only difference, from the perspective of the novice, would be that theologians have a preference for things that pertain to God and religion, and philosophers, though they may deal with these things as well, prefer to speak about things like logic and causality.

The difference between these fields, however, runs deeper than matters of preference. They are different in their very natures and, as such, their perspectives, methods, and conclusions are all affected. This difference is therefore of great import. Not only must

each field, in order to properly attain its conclusions and formulate its arguments, have its own proper autonomy, but the relationship between them must also be properly understood so that they may benefit from one another. Thus, in view of the ongoing debate, I wish to write to elucidate and clarify certain misunderstood and misinterpreted notions between philosophy and theology. Hence, my aim in this essay is to examine the relationship between philosophy and theology and to show whether philosophy is the handmaid of theology or not.

Meaning of Theology

The word, theology (from the Greek *theologia*, meaning the science of God), is the study of God and his relation to the world. It indicates that God is the primary object of theology; creatures are the secondary objects of theology. Theology is therefore, concerned with them insofar as they are related to God. Sometimes theology is defined as faith seeking understanding: *fides quaerens intellectum*. In other words, it is man's attempt to comprehend better what God has revealed and man has accepted in faith. Theology can also be defined as the science of the faith. In this case, the word science means a systematized, organized body of knowledge (Gratsh, 1981)

As a science, theology is both speculative and practical. It is speculative because it contemplates God and the things of God. This is especially true of dogmatic theology. It is practical because it directs human beings to God, their ultimate end. This is especially true of moral theology. Because theology is concerned with God as He has disclosed himself through revelation and because theology directs human beings to God who is their ultimate end, it is superior to all other sciences which are primarily concerned with creatures and more immediate ends. Theology uses the other sciences whenever this is helpful towards attaining its own objectives. Theology is the conscious effort of the Christian to establish the fact of revelation, to acquire knowledge of revelation by the methods of scholarship, to penetrate, clarify, and interpret, to make appropriate application of it to life, to discover created analogies useful for illustrating revealed mysteries, to arrange revealed truths in a systematic order, and to answer objections against the whole of revelation or against particular revealed truths (Gratsh, p.17-18).

The role of theology must normally involve the valid and fruitful task of rationally and systematically using the methods and resources of the intellect in accordance with the capacity thereof. According to St. Thomas, it is justifiable to classify theology as a science – or, more accurately, that “sacred doctrine” in its traditional meaning included the functions of a science in its broadest epistemological sense. For Chenu (p.28), reasoning, is a major operation in theology.

Meaning of Philosophy

The word philosophy is from the Greek word *Sophia*, which means “wisdom” and *logos* which means “love of”. Thus philosophy is literally defined as a love of wisdom. One definition of philosophy might be “a search for ultimate reality and an attempt to say what it is.” This is a search in which theology clearly also has an interest (Omogbe, 1993). Philosophy can also be defined as a rational search for answers to the questions

that arise in the mind when we reflect on human experiences. From the few definitions above, we can sum up that philosophy is a rational, critical, organized, and systematic discipline which seeks to provide solutions to the basic questions about the ultimate meaning of reality as a whole and human life in particular. Thus, philosophy is a search, a continuous search for meaning, for intelligibility and for answers. It is a search that never ends, for by its very nature, philosophy is always on the way and never arrives at its destination. It is a continuous search for answers to questions, but it accepts no dogmatic answers – (this is one of the areas where philosophy and theology differ greatly). In philosophy no answer is definitive, for every answer is itself subject to criticism and turns out to be the basis for further questions. No answer can put an end to the philosophical inquiry, since every answer turns out to be a new question.

In fact, the important thing in philosophy is not the answer but the question – the question is more important than the answer itself. The second key-point to point to note is that philosophy is a rational search; the philosophical inquiry is a purely rational inquiry. This means that philosophy excludes supernatural revelation which theology upholds. Hence it excludes dogmas and accepts no dogmatic answers that would put an end to any further questioning. The third point to note is that the questions asked in philosophy are not questions of a particular nature, but of a general nature. The fourth point is that philosophy arises from reflection on human experience, that is, man's experience of his own being and of reality outside him (Omogbe, 1993). As for Bertand Russell, philosophy arises from an unusually obstinate attempt to arrive at real knowledge (Russell, 1979). Thus, having examined the meaning of philosophy as much as possible, let us now turn to the relationship between theology and philosophy.

Relationships between Philosophy and Theology

In the first place, philosophy is needed in order that theology might be a science at all. This is because a science is a body of knowledge that has its own set of principles and, on the basis of these principles, derives further conclusions. This is true of mathematics, biology, engineering, and so forth – and it is also true of theology. Now, while the principles of the science of theology are not known by philosophical reasoning (they come by revelation), the further conclusions that flow from these principles are derived with its help.

The principles of the science of theology are given in the articles of the Creed and in Sacred Scripture and they are known by us through faith, not through philosophical reasoning: you cannot, by unaided reason, conclude that the doctrine of the Trinity is true, for example. Nonetheless, from the starting point of these principles (received by faith) further conclusions can be drawn, and this is done by philosophical reasoning. For example, the conclusion that Christ has two intellects; this is not directly revealed to us. However, it is revealed that He is God and that He is man. After all, we say that we believe in “Jesus Christ His Only Son our Lord ... Who was incarnate from the Virgin Mary.” Starting from these two revealed truths, we reason that, since both God and man are rational, and since Christ is God and man, he must have both a divine and a human

intellect.

In moral theology, the derivation of conclusions from revealed principles with the help of philosophical reasoning is very common indeed. For example, it is revealed to us that man has been created in the image of God (Gen 1:28). From this we can conclude that man is different from all the animals and, accordingly, one man cannot own another man (as he can own an animal). The second service that philosophy renders to theology is that it allows a deeper penetration into the truths that are already known by revelation (through faith). Take, for example, what the Creed says about the Father: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth.” Without some philosophical understanding of what is meant by the word “Creator” this whole sentence is basically meaningless. Creation is normally taken to mean that something comes to be out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). The philosophical concept of creation, therefore, aids us in making sense of revelation.

Furthermore, it might be asked whether the Creed means to tell us that only the Father is the Creator and that the other Persons of the Trinity are not involved. Again, philosophy comes to our aid. Creation is an action on the part of God and all actions presuppose a certain nature capable of that action. For example, to think rationally (an action) presupposes a creature with a rational nature. This means that the divine act of creation is attributable to the divine nature (rather than to divine personhood). This leads to the conclusion that, since all three divine persons are of one nature, all three Persons are involved in creation. Philosophy, again, helps to solve the apparent problem.

The third way that philosophy comes to the service of theology is built upon the fact that truths known by sound philosophy and truths known by revelation alone cannot contradict each other. Truth is truth and (as is self-evident) something cannot be both true and false in the same respect and at the same time. Another way to reach this same conclusion is to note that God is the one source both of revealed truth and human reason.

Two important consequences follow from this. First: a philosophical conclusion that is clearly contrary to revealed truth – such as that the universe had no beginning – cannot actually be a sound philosophical conclusion because it contradicts certain revelation. This helps to guide both the development of philosophical thinking as well as the thinking in natural science. Second: a theological position that is clearly contrary to a sound philosophical conclusion cannot be true, either. For example, if it was proved beyond any doubt that the universe was not created in six days then this would mean that an interpretation of Genesis to the contrary would be false. This would not mean that Scripture is in error, only that our interpretation of it was faulty.

The fourth invaluable service rendered by philosophy concerns the defense of the faith.

Let us use, again, the example of the Trinity: that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God. We have already said that this truth is beyond the grasp of unaided human reason and that we come to it by way of revelation. What happens if an opponent of the faith objects to this dogma claiming that it is a contradiction because, as he understands it, the dogma claims that three equals one and, as any first-grade student of mathematics knows, three does not equal one, but three. “The philosophical concept of creation, that something comes to be out of nothing, aids us in making sense of revelation”. How does the defender of the faith respond to this? He turns to sound philosophy. With the aid of philosophy, he points out that the dogma of the Trinity says that three persons have one nature and then points out that person and nature are not the same reality, so there is no contradiction, at all. He would need, of course, to explain that the notion of person pertains to who is there, whereas the concept of nature pertains to what is there.

A better place to look for insight into the problem of the relationship between philosophy and theology is Pope John Paul II's encyclical called “Faith and Reason”? The subject of this encyclical, the relationship between faith and reason, necessarily speaks about the relationship between the academic disciplines bound up with each: philosophy and theology. According to Pope John Paul II, philosophy is one resource among many generated by humankind in order to advance knowledge of truth. It is also directly concerned with asking the question of life's meaning and with sketching an answer. Lastly, he calls it one of “the noblest human tasks,” which “shows that desire for truth is part of human nature itself.” Additionally, there are certain fundamentals of human thought which show themselves to be universal across time and space. For example, the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality, and of the person as a free and intelligent subject are shared by all. These indicate that, “beyond different schools of thought, there exists a body of knowledge which may be judged a kind of spiritual heritage of humanity. It is as if we had come upon an *implicit philosophy...*” in which all participate.

Briefly, in the beginning of this encyclical, John Paul II mentions the knowledge which belongs to the order of faith. This knowledge, he says, is higher than that which is proper to natural reason. These orders of knowledge are neither identical with nor mutually exclusive from one another. They differ with regard to their source and their object. The knowledge proper to reason has its source in sense experience and as its object those things which reason can derive from such experience. The knowledge proper to faith has its source in divine faith and its object is those things which God reveals to mankind which would not otherwise be known. There is, nevertheless, a “profound and indissoluble unity” between these orders of knowledge.

John Paul II goes on to discuss the thoughts of Saints Anselm and Aquinas on the subject of the relationship between faith and reason. According to Anselm, reason cannot pass judgment on matters of faith, since that is not its role. For Thomas, there is great harmony between faith and reason. Since both ultimately come from God, they cannot contradict one another. Furthermore, the relationship between them is analogous to that between grace and nature. As grace builds upon and perfects nature, so does faith do the

same to reason. Despite this organic link between philosophy and theology, both of these men think that philosophy needs a certain autonomy within its field of research if it is to perform well.

In view of the ongoing debate, philosophy and theology are two different disciplines, but then, they relate meaningfully to each other. Philosophy and theology in my own understanding, are like twins, having certain interests in common. Being twins, I see theology as the first of the twins while philosophy is the second. Being the first, theology has the birthright of knowing and explaining things (metaphysical things) as they are better and more than philosophy, since in view of their being twins, philosophy has become a brother to theology, who needs the help of theology to lead it across where it cannot extend itself to alone. On the other hand, being the first of the two, theology also needs the help of his brother – philosophy, to help it clarify certain issues, since both of them have certain autonomy in their respective fields.

Thus, everyone needs to know some philosophy in order to understand the major doctrines of Christianity or to read a great theologian intelligently. Philosophical knowledge enables one to appreciate more deeply the meaning of virtually every major doctrinal formulation and every major theologian. For instance, knowledge of philosophy enables us to understand a particular theologian or doctrine. For instance, the knowledge of Aristotle's *Categories* enables us to see how Gregory of Nyssa in writing on the Trinity rose above the philosophical conceptuality of his day. A person cannot recognize that achievement without the knowledge of Aristotle's *Categories*.

Finally, there is an inherent relationship between philosophy and theology. Philosophy, as it was begun by the Greeks, has as its end the attainment of wisdom. Wisdom is knowledge of first principles and causes. The first principles and causes are divine. Therefore, theology is the end of successful philosophy. The distinction that Aquinas makes between philosophical theology and Christian theology is what today distinguishes philosophy from theology. The distinction drawn beforehand, which suggested that theology was simply philosophy that dealt with divine things, would now be considered philosophy. Specifically, philosophy that deals with knowledge of first causes is called metaphysics. Philosophy belongs to the public realm and is based on axioms that any human person has access to by virtue of his reasoning ability. Theology is based on truths contained within divine revelation that are inaccessible to unaided human reason. These two disciplines, working as they do with their two kinds of truth, are nevertheless related. First, because philosophy leads to knowledge of God. Second, because this knowledge of God, attainable by natural reason, makes it reasonable to believe in the mysteries of the faith.

Is Philosophy a Handmaid of Theology?

The maxim that philosophy should serve as the handmaiden of theology was frequently proclaimed by scholastic theologians in the Middle Ages. They expressed it in these terms: *Philosophia theologiae ancilla*. In his article *Philosophy, Handmaid of Theology?* Maurice Nedoncelle responded to the issue whether philosophy is handmaid of theology

or not. He noted that theologians and philosophers belong to two different races. He compared them to cats and dogs living under the same roof, but regards one another with affection. According to him, the Christian philosopher is afraid of the theologian since he feels that the theologian will not hesitate to force him to make incursions into his field, and that he will use philosophy for the benefit of his own enthusiasms. On the part of the theologian, says Maurice, he is not any happier with the philosopher's approach (Nedoncelle).

But then, the question is; does theology need philosophy as handmaid? Is philosophy a slave; a maid-of-all-work? a housekeeper? For Nedoncelle, the answer is yes, but I feel he is wrong. This is because, though theology needs philosophy, philosophy on the other hand is not a slave to theology. This, as Nedoncelle himself rightly pointed out is because philosophy has real autonomy. However, we must note that even as philosophy has real autonomy, it is still dependent on faith to some extent. But then this dependency does not make philosophy a slave of theology or its handmaid.

It is pertinent to call to mind here that, the stranglehold of the theologian on philosophy is accentuated by pedagogy, for the teaching of theology demands the preliminary adoption of a widely accepted language and logic. This can be seen in the case of Luther who was obliged to re-introduce philosophical teachings into the German universities. This is the more reason then, why the Catholic tradition calls for an underlying philosophy. The Catholic Church today and always needs students – seminarians, priests who have been trained in scholastic philosophy: because a uniformed vocabulary is needed, an audience that will understand what one intends to say, e.g. they must know the meaning of essence, substance etc. Also, because dogma must be based on firm convictions, e.g., the fact that there is a God, a soul, etc., must be established. If this be the case, philosophy should not be seen negatively as a handmaid of theology but rather as a co-worker (and a very important co-worker) in the field of human knowledge.

Despite the differences between philosophy and theology, Aquinas contends that they do not contradict each other (as some people think), rather they are related like the gifts of nature and grace. Grace, Aquinas says, does not destroy nature but perfects it. Similarly, the light of faith does not do away with the light of reason, but it reveals truth beyond the reach of reason itself. For this reason, Aquinas teaches that there is some overlapping between philosophy and theology. For the most part, however, philosophy and theology are two separate and independent disciplines. Wherever reason is capable of knowing something, faith strictly speaking, is necessary, and what faith uniquely knows through revelation cannot be known by natural reason alone. Both philosophy and theology deal with God, but the philosopher can only infer that God exists and cannot by reflecting upon the objects of sensation understand God's essential nature. There is, nevertheless, a coalescence of the object of philosophy and theology since they are both concerned with truth (Aquinas, 1987).

Philosophy as a discipline is not bad in itself. This is because philosophy is concerned with human existence and experiences. It examines and tries to understand and interpret

some natural phenomena as it affects human experiences or human beings. As a rational, critical, systematic and organized discipline, philosophy questions everything in search of truth. Its questioning begins with wonder and awe and proceeds to analysis. It tries to provide answers to so many human “whats”, “whys”, and “hows”. In other words, philosophy tries to provide answers to the fundamental questions or the basic questions that confront man in his universe.

Conclusion

As we have seen, philosophy is not bad in itself, but in the application of its principles by some misguided individuals or philosophers. For this reason, philosophy should not be regarded as a mere handmaiden of theology, because philosophy rather throws more light to the articles of the Christian beliefs or religion in general. This is why theology is sometimes defined as faith seeking understanding (theology seeking the knowledge of or assistance of philosophy). Philosophy has been, and I hope, will continue to be of a greater help and service to theology in trying to articulate, elucidate, clarify and introduce a deeper understanding of some of the crucial issues of our belief. We must note that “handmaid” or “handmaiden” is one of those tricky terms. Used sneeringly, it implies inferiority at best, slavishness at worst: “Philosophy is just a handmaiden.” It is like arithmetic, a tool. It is valuable, but only in an instrumental way. However, when used in a kinder, gentler way, the term “handmaiden” implies a privileged relationship: Philosophy is not a waste of time for Catholics or theologians. No, philosophy is the executive assistant, the 'right-hand man' of theology. Without philosophy, theologians would be reduced to a bunch of drooling, snake-handling morons. Anyway, philosophy is an invaluable aid to my own appropriation of difficult religious concepts. It doesn't interfere with my faith, but helps me to understand it a bit more. Finally, it ought not to be thought that the utility of the perennial philosophy remains confined to the ivory tower of academia. For good or for bad, philosophical ideas beat a path down the corridor of history: They have practical consequences in the way people live their lives.

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