



Reflections on the Teaching of Philosophy in Clerical Seminaries

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Abstract

People cannot receive information about philosophy while being themselves dispensed from philosophising, thinking. This requirement is reasonable, since “all men desire to know”. A dualist approach to philosophy and theology obscures that they are the same. Revelation is immanent within the thinking person and grace, *pace* Thomas, is not extrinsic. Ecumenism, the principle, underpins this. So the philosophy of theology transcends external confessionalism, as does Christian faith itself.

Keywords

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I begin with a personal anecdote. Some years ago I had to teach a course on the history of philosophy to a group of five students who made up the Catholic seminary of one of the Scandinavian dioceses. I had prepared the lectures carefully, so as to give the students a just picture of the development of philosophical thought down the ages, its interaction with religious traditions and so on. At some point halfway through the first year, we would have just about reached Anselm, I was interrupted by probably the brightest of the students, a Pole. He told me that I failed to understand that I was supposed merely to inform them about philosophy, not try to get them to philosophise. As future priests they did not have time for that. Those were his words, more or less. When I replied that there was no possibility of just being informed here, that they must try to understand and therefore interact with the philosophers concerned, he replied, in the language of the country where we found ourselves, two exiles, that “must” belonged in Russia, i.e. and not elsewhere. I laughingly agreed but continued to maintain my view of the students’ duty. This young man could well be a bishop by now. He had a lot of “go”.

Securus iudicat orbis terrarum. I wonder. There is certainly a long tradition of seminary education as we have it. Every candidate for orders has to go through a course of philosophical studies, although there is no reason to expect that even a majority of aspirants have natural aptitude or attraction for such study. One knows what torture it was for the saintly Curé of Ars, the official patron of parish priests, while the hero of Bernanos' novel is clearly of just that ilk. Even if we consider, with Hegel perhaps, that mysticism represents a kind of final distillation of philosophy, as in Augustine, Aquinas, Nicholas of Cusa, Eriugena, Plato or Hegel himself, we have still to recognise that some mystics have jumped right in at the end of this road. They have even at times dispensed with a need to be able to read and write, though they may still, like St. Catherine, be declared "doctors of the Church".

One is reminded here of the claims some people make for "African philosophy". This, in some versions, turns out to be a kind of folk-wisdom of illiterate peoples, as if a proverb such as "There are no crossroads in the ear" can be put on a par and studied together with, say, Aristotle's analysis of contradiction in Book Four of his *Metaphysics*. Africans who do philosophy are not obliged to defend or take on board this kind of "African philosophy", however.

The question would be then, is there some kind of "seminary philosophy", some attitude seminarians should be encouraged to have which might be regarded as philosophical, but which differs from the attitude of Kant or Aristotle or even, dare I say, of Thomas Aquinas? We had better stick with the last-named for the moment. It is quite clear that Aquinas had a dualistic attitude as between philosophy and theology. We will be suggesting that such an attitude can no longer be maintained, whatever havoc this change of view may wreak in seminary education. All the same, Aquinas engaged in dialogue with philosophers, of his own and past times, with respect and diligence, based upon preliminary effort to understand what was being said.

But St. Thomas does not appear ever critically to have questioned the "popular" notion of *revelation*, as an extrinsic divine breaking into history. This is what Hegel does. He shows how revelation must be philosophically understood as an immanent process within the thinking person, which is at the same time transcendently absolute. This discovery entirely bridges the previous chasm between "natural" philosophy and "supernatural" revelation, enabling seminarians and others at last to take philosophy seriously and not as if it could not possibly affect or matter to them.

There is something in its object concealed from consciousness if the object is for consciousness an "other", or something alien, and if consciousness does not know the object as its self. This concealment, this secrecy, ceases when the Absolute Being *qua* spirit is object of

consciousness. For here in its relation to consciousness the object is in the form of self; i.e. consciousness immediately knows itself there, or is manifest, revealed to itself in the object... It is the pure notion... It is thus the truly and solely revealed... To be in its notion that which reveals and is revealed - this is, then, the true shape of spirit... its notion... alone its very essence and its substance. Spirit... is this self-consciousness itself. The divine nature is the same as the human...¹

This is in full continuity with the history of philosophy, going back to Eckhart (“The eye with which I see God is the eye with which God sees me”) and Augustine (“There is one closer to me than I am to myself”). Hegel particularly enables us to see how it goes back to Aristotle, to the pure *nous*, which at one and the same time is the *nous* of the concrete person and reason as filling and shaping the universe. This is the soul which is “all things”, as much or more than a particular piece of bread is in Catholic belief the “body of Christ”. After this it follows quite naturally that

The absolute Being existing as a concrete actual self-consciousness, seems to have descended from its eternal pure simplicity: but in fact it has, in so doing, attained for the first time to its highest nature... The lowest is thus at the same time the highest: the revealed which has come forth entirely to the surface is just therein the deepest reality. That the Supreme Being is seen, heard, etc., as an existent self-consciousness, – this is, in very truth, the culmination and consummation of its notion.

This, he means, is when and how God first exists, is reality or full notion, that most perfect being that, just thereby, cannot but exist, as Anselm saw. Of course one means “first” only in that we would thus first attain to God’s, and our own, supra-temporal reality. Time is where what is beyond time is *manifest*, namely the truth. The “pure singleness of self” is an abstraction making possible sense-experience, which Hegel treats as one with this concrete appearance, highest and lowest, of “deepest reality”. Actually we “are all members one of another”.

Aristotle’s presentation of *nous* as it were evoked incarnation, the universal in the particular. Since this is itself a universal truth Aquinas easily concludes that incarnation can take place in a plurality of individual natures, of course human natures, since “the rational creature” is a name for what is *capax Dei*. What is in religion and “positive” theology presented as contingent potentiality, however, is in reality necessity and identity, of “all in all”, actually the final vista of religion also.

¹ C.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1966, pp. 759–760.

The “Arians of the fourth century” (Newman’s title) were, therefore, both right and wrong. The fuller interpretation of Catholic Trinitarianism lay in the future, while Jesus as prototype for creatures, they thought, had to be a creature, first-begotten indeed. The truth is that we are none of us creatures, just because selfhood is not membership of a “society of animals” but each in all and all in each, identity in difference. If *one* is revealed as divine then all are divine, absolute. This Aquinas found to be possible but unfitting, a direct result of his realist assumptions. Yet creation is in fact a “figurative” notion, since God knows nothing outside of himself. This is why for Aquinas too it does not finally stand, but only “the bodies of the redeemed”, this being the meaning of *the* resurrection. It is in our own consciousness, finally, that the Trinitarian relations are realised since apart from us the Absolute has no consciousness. Not only so but the “us” is finally one, *each* one, the “body of Christ”, members one of another, all in each and each in all, bearing one another’s burdens, co-inherent. The Trinitarian mystery, all the same, remains subject to further interpretation still while, as the fourth evangelist states, there are yet other traditions, other sheep, not of this fold, and them also our thought must “bring”. As for the Trinity itself, it is not really a matter of number. Number is not posited in divine things and the indeterminacy with respect to a separate unity which we find in the notion of self, of itself connoting an infinity, is naturally magnified when we aspire to consider any yet more absolute relation. What is true is that consciousness is or ought to be at home in otherness, so that, again, other is self. This, indeed, is the only way to think infinite love.

What then of faith? It *seeks* understanding, such as we here give it. Even in the pages of Scripture explanations are given of what was at first presented as arbitrary or, to our thinking, contingent manifestations of divine or absolute freedom. Although these explanations themselves get canonised as scriptural what is thus recorded as normative is seen to be the natural human process of understanding and interpretation, such as we offer here. It is, that is to say, canonised as a principle of procedure, or confirmed rather, since it anyhow stands as its own justification. The truth of reasoning is one of the truths concerning which reason more or less effectively reasons.

Here we have to distinguish between the form and the content of revelation. The figurative form in which the content is first presented, corresponding to narrative intuition, changes with the development of philosophy. Philosophy thus “accomplishes” religion, the content, which remains ever the same. Thus all philosophies coincide, although insight into this truth, itself present from the beginning, the spirit of God moving on the face of the waters, represents a further step in categorial dialectic.

To this view of things, the philosophical or *rational* view, corresponds the enthronement of democracy in the popular consciousness and the minds of its political spokesmen. This too was prefigured in Christianity, as absolute religion, where man, any man or woman or trans-sexual² person, received an infinite value, as “end”, precisely and universally as man and as “son (daughter) of man (woman)”. Universal suffrage with its corollary, universal education, is the fruit of this. “Go and teach all nations”, the apostles were told, commissioned, but this process, we have seen, cannot stop short of those thus taught returning (*exitus* and *reditus*) to further teach the teachers. Here too the exchanges of love are for ever mutually enriching. It is impossible to tell just where the irony of the apostle over the opinionatedness of his charges, in 2 *Corinthians*, say, passes over into admiration and readiness to learn from them. In the Gospel too there is talk of disciples doing “greater things than I have done”, of course in consequence of those coming first, of him who “will be in you” as all will be “in one another”, members even of one another. The religious and authoritative promise, in other words, embodies at one and the same time an insight into the infinite nature of the self, its constitutive identity with what is other.

As for democracy, it means that the authoritative, that which is deserving of respect, is no longer to be contradictorily confused with a constraint which ends, has ended, in undermining all respect. That the last is first and the first last means that all such hierarchy is in its absoluteness abolished, that a cat may not merely look at a king but jump upon his lap and even at times reverse the relation. I am that.

As regards philosophy accomplishing religion, clerical thinkers or those in close association with what they are pleased to call the *magisterium* often like to stress what they see as the *provisional* character of philosophical conclusions, this being what makes, say, the liberal arts liberal. This notion is not unattractive, but it attracts as does, say, the “discarded image” of the Ptolemaic or medieval universe. We have, since Copernicus, and of course at other times too, achieved knowledge such that we know that we know. We know, for example, that the earth is round, of such and such a size, just as we know the relative distances of planets or stars from one another, how and why they move and so on.

There is, however, no call to quarantine this knowledge, this attitude to knowledge, to a closed off area called, in English-speaking countries, “science”. It is self-defeating to attribute to science, i.e. “natural” or “empirical” science, a certainty superior to that attained in other fields. Thus mathematics or logic are not empirical, except

² This term is to be preferred to “bisexual”, which refers rather to the consequent behaviour and inclination of the trans-sexual person or even to an arbitrary attitude available to anyone.

on certain questionable accounts of them. What, say, the Copernican revolution represented was a clear revolution in regard to the human confidence in reason, implying an implicit dethronement of theology in certain areas. This controversy is quite simply being repeated in our day in regard to evolution and “creationism”, as clearly stands out. For a long time religious authorities tried to represent evolution as hypothesis merely, and the same misrepresentation was accorded Copernicus, e.g. in the Lutheran Osiander’s Preface to the first edition of his work. It was left to Galileo a lifetime or more later to insist that there was no point in insisting on a naked would-be-Emperor’s clothes in this way. The earth moves, in simple fact, and our ideas of *Joshua* or other ancient authorities must adapt accordingly. The religious or obscurantist attitude is dangerous and should be fought. Thus, for example, Copernicus’s knowledge, what he knew and knew that he knew, might have gone the way of similar knowledge attained by Aristarchus almost two millennia previously.

At the time of Copernicus, all the same, the type of study upon which he was engaged was not distinguished from other “arts” as able in principle to yield greater certainty. The attitude today, therefore, that certainty is the prerogative of “science” is a prejudice of scientists. Thus, for example, reasons for rejecting evolution, that cornerstone of modernity, as a final hypothesis even in biology seem to be mounting up. Nor though does this herald a regress to “creationism”. It calls, rather, for a new approach altogether³, one paying as much attention to the role of “the observer” as physics has been obliged to do. So philosophers wishing to protect religious loyalties do not help themselves, in the long run, by adopting an analogous theological positivism.

We see this in the case of political theory, perhaps for that reason re-christened recently, and barbarously, as political science. To suggest that democracy with its attendant rights is a hypothesis open to future revision is just to reveal oneself as really an opportunistic fascist. I say this without thereby excluding further analysis of the very notion of a “natural” or similar right. Democracy, the equal and indeed infinite dignity of each, of man as man, stands independently, just as it was thematised by Kant two centuries ago, and without any need for a “dogmatic definition”. It is at least as certain a truth as the earth’s roundness and possibly more so, if we allow for the idealist stream in philosophical reflection. The same applies to the doctrine of virtue though not, again, to all “legal” applications of it, to derivations, that is, of what is wrong or illicit.

³ Thus that Hegel rejected evolution of species is not explained simply by his having lived before Darwin, who, incidentally, was himself doubtful, admitting the lack of evidence.

It is in this light too that we should view the Vatican conciliar declaration of 1870 concerning the truth of God as knowable to human reason. It refers to the knowableness of the reasonableness of reality as *absolute*, of God however we are to conceive him. Thus it makes no mention, lays no stress, upon the difference between God and man, upon the subjection or slavery of man, as if he might not be one with God respecting his reason. God might indeed be beyond or above mere existence, and modern atheism might be a twisted acknowledgement of this. The declaration, this is the point, invokes a certainty every bit as robust as that of the natural sciences. Thus it is that we can think of philosophy as “accomplishing” the content of religion, inherently deficient as to its form. In this way we have to move on from medieval views which saw the figurative element in religion not as defect but as an advantage in dealing with realities intrinsically unintelligible to us. Confidence in reason, its divinity, aided by a *lumen gloriae* (connatural to it) or not, means that nothing actual is unintelligible. As the medievals themselves liked to say, *omne ens est verum*. Enthroning the goddess Reason on the main altar in Paris in 1789 or thereabouts meant nothing more than that and was quintessentially Christian as deriving from “the absolute religion”. “Liberty, equality, fraternity”, similarly, sums up the Good News of the Gospels as presented anew to our modern age, though we have still to practice it fully.

Thus Aristotle’s statement concerning education in regard to ethical truths, that different degrees of certainty are appropriate to different materials studied, to different types of study, need not be denied. What we are saying, rather, is that nothing forbids us discovering or seeking to discover certainty there where we once despaired of it or never even dreamed of finding it by our own efforts, about the movements of the planets, for example, or the appearance of man on earth. This remains true in principle even where we might allow sceptical objections to evolution, say, such as that the time-period is too short for the actual development we must postulate, that therefore we should rather think of a development promoted by an ingredient from outer space, say.

In accordance with this confidence in reason philosophy has developed in modern times a system in which the history of philosophy, inclusive of its oppositions and contradictions, not after all absent from the natural sciences either, is a manifestation in time of absolute spirit, of reason. Every human philosophy is a “moment” of this, to be understood in relation to the whole and not to be ignored or rejected. Dogmatism is here transcended, though it may recur in too definite interpretations of dialectic itself, such as in “dialectical materialism”, a materialist dialectic, rather, the qualification destroying the transcendence. That thought is inherently dialectical is simply the principle of discourse and conversation and not a dogma at all.

We have perhaps said enough to show that the received notion of seminarians taking a look at or getting informed about philosophy as something of no real existential concern to them, thus enabling them to appear before their flock or the world at large as “cultured” or “informed”, is not coherent. This suggests that the gradual positing of theology, starting from an earlier notion of the *regula fidei*, as an absolute or divine science, to which philosophy is the “handmaid”, represented from the beginning an *ad hoc* expedient. As such it was meant to help transform a whole European population, learned and unlearned, into the *populus christianus*. Here, though, we should not ignore the way theology first grew up, as it were naturally, as continual commentary upon scripture. Thus it is scripture itself which gets explained as having symbolic and narrative forms suitable for communication with learned and unlearned alike. Yet we cannot remain with such a crippling dualism, nor do those still calling themselves theologians by and large do so. They claim rather the right and duty to correct or amplify the notions, as expressed, of the sacred writers themselves and today’s unlearned would rightly resent being kept in the dark about that. Even small children, however, as yet untouched by the *Zeitgeist*, can resent being fobbed off with the Adam and Eve story as literal. *Theologia* is an ancient Greek name for metaphysics, as such open to all. It was into this arena among the learned that Christianity was introduced, as witness Justin or the Alexandrines. That it offered also, or even principally, salvation or happiness to the unlearned does not mark it off from this ancient human endeavour, the love of wisdom, whether practised in Greece or India. This was actually not different in type from the Platonic principle of dialogue, if we but abstract from Socratic irony. The apostle Paul had a lot of irony of his own, anyhow.

This negative moment of dualism collapses once we see that concepts of revelation and religious authority themselves not merely call for but *elicit* philosophical analysis. Similarly, introducing development of Christian doctrine as itself a doctrine elicits development of this doctrine of development, as we develop it here. The stream of Christian thought, seen thus, is part of the patrimony of philosophy and there is no sense in continuing to refuse this dignity to it, an attitude typically manifesting itself in the closing of academies. At that point, in seventh century Byzantium or nineteenth century Rome, where the option of ontologism and *a fortiori* Hegelianism was suppressed, faith gets fatally pushed over into ideology, a system of ideas devised by some human beings for the domination, desperate as it may be, of other human beings.

In Rome in 1879 Leo XIII published his encyclical restoring the teaching of Thomism, more and more as *the* authoritative teaching, in ecclesial places of learning. This seemingly innocent and creative attempt to restore order, on an imaginary medieval model, to modern

thinking is perhaps more justly viewed as deeply subversive, whatever its incidental benefits, of which there have been many. One after another the new philosophies were condemned by the clerical order, typically as “not safe”. Ontologism had been developed out of Hegelianism, in Italy chiefly. Some propositions of Rosmini, at least close to the ontologist movement at that time, have lately, as he has come up for canonisation, been freed from their earlier condemnation. The then Cardinal Ratzinger, justifying this turnabout, explicitly stated that what is condemned at one time may be reinstated at another, depending on context. Not even Hegel achieves such a degree of relativism, or nihilistic cynicism, as one might see it, though it is no secret after all, regarding people’s thoughts and insights. Such a person, such an attitude, has renounced all insight, all striving for it, as “the mystical”. Zeal for the law, guarantee, as it happens, of one’s own employment as front-line soldier, consumes everything.

The variety of philosophical approaches among Catholics, in itself a sign of vitality, was seen by the clergy as rather a kind of undesirable eclecticism, a kind of spiritual libertinage recalling the ancient gnosticism. This though is a two-edged criticism. Thus when Karl Rahner is found a century later criticising Augustine’s Trinitarian thought, in particular the analogy he draws with human thought processes, as verging upon gnosticism then one naturally wonders if gnosticism is always such a bad or unorthodox thing after all.⁴ The same applies to Voegelin’s description of just Lutheranism as a gnosticism.

In the mid-nineteenth century the clerics, that is, the theologians, principally Joseph Kleutgen S.J., began to urge that Thomism was the ideal philosophy for backing up Catholic dogma and that no other was needed. Whatever is the case with the sacred texts of religion it is astounding that anyone thought that philosophical texts of the thirteenth century could render all later thought otiose. What blinded the orthodox to the absurdity of this project was fear plain and simple. With Hegelianism they could not deal, while the later “modernist” crisis was a further step into an all-encompassing hysteria, as we now see all too clearly. The very name “modernist”, as *ipso facto* pejorative, betrays the total loss of confidence, the burying of a talent.

⁴ It is also quite striking that in an article on the Trinity in *Sacramentum Mundi* Rahner disdains even to mention Hegel’s Trinitarian thought, even though he complains that the doctrine has not developed since the fourteenth century Greek Orthodox speculations. Unlike God, Rahner is clearly a “respector of persons” here. He might at least have chided Augustine with anticipating the unnamed inheritor rather than recalling the Gnostics. Orthodoxy, anyway, has always “verged upon” heresy, though knowing how to “keep off the grass”.

What was at stake was, principally, the preservation of the clerical order. For this a dualist system of thought is required, faith and reason, nature and the supernatural, philosophy and theology, such as one finds in Thomas Aquinas but not in Aristotle or Hegel, his modern interpreter. Attempts to enlist Plato's attitude to myth, as vindicating the Thomist downgrading of philosophy to theology's "handmaid", are just not germane. Plato tried to show these myths as arising out of the soil of reason, just as we find in Hegel that philosophy "accomplishes" Christianity. For Thomas Aquinas, by contrast, the philosophers were in general an extinct class or, we might say again, order. He lived, quite simply, in a sacral civilisation which had been established since at least five centuries before him, the faith-principle having been taken over by the civil authorities as an ideological instrument. The clergy by and large abetted this loss of the spiritual, promoted it even, believing indiscriminately, or anyhow claiming, that what they bound on earth would be bound in heaven. Thomas Aquinas did his best to find *rationale* for the situation, as when he says simply, after quoting all the texts speaking against a military defence of "the faith", against military religious orders even, that the Church has at present, or for the present, chosen that form of witness. He in fact presents an extreme form of papalism, the "power of the keys", which clearly helped commend him to the devisers of *Aeterni patris*. "The letter kills, the spirit gives life," this was a text best left to the Protestants, who had after all ridden it to death, or maybe to those few faithful still to be found skulking around in monasteries. These were not going to rock the boat.

We are not concerned here with some dialectic maybe necessitating these sins, errors, limitations as part of some grand design in which the proclamation of this or that truth was found inopportune or "not safe". We are concerned with truth, such as everyone has to be who claims to teach or understand philosophy or to have any kind of contemplative wisdom at all. Here my young Polish friend was so far right that what goes on in seminaries when they "toe the line" just is not philosophy. Seminarians are not in any way initiated into a culture, as are the monks when they chant the psalms. Rather, they are trained and prepared as ideological troops, or pastors, to vary the metaphor. This noble function though cannot but be sullied when what the sheep are force-fed with is ideology. Here again though one suspects that, taken literally, as it has been, this function was bound thus to degenerate. As purely Johannine though also, previously, Pauline it is corrected within scripture by the injunction to "call no man father". Here Hegel's explication of the injunction to receive the kingdom as a little child is pertinent:

Childlike innocence no doubt has in it something fascinating and attractive: but only because it reminds us of what the spirit must win

for itself. The harmoniousness of childhood is a gift from the hand of nature: the second harmony must spring from the labour and culture of the spirit. And so the words of Christ, “Except ye *become* as little children,” &co., are very far from telling us that we must always remain children.⁵

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⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Enc.* 24, subtext. Cf. this whole section.