

James D. Capehart

Gilson’s Notion of *Theologism* in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* and *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*

In the following essay I intend to examine in Gilson’s own words the meaning of the often misunderstood term which he coined, *viz. theologism*. In order to do so, I will focus on his 1937 *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* and his 1938 *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*. In Chapter 2 of his *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, titled “Theologism and Philosophy,” Gilson provides an important further treatment for the *theologism* that he hinted at and treated of but did not name explicitly one year earlier in *Christianisme et Philosophie*.¹ He

James D. Capehart — Unaffiliated Scholar, USA
e-mail: jimcape73@gmail.com • ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2555-7203>

¹ The first instance in which I have found Gilson using the phrase *théologisme pur* is in the essay “La notion de philosophie chrétienne,” Session of 21 March, *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* 31, no. 2 (1931), translated by Gregory Sadler as “The Notion of Christian Philosophy,” in *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation: The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates in France* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 128–140. There he speaks of “pure theologism” as being one attitude toward philosophy which is opposed to the real existence of Christian philosophy as Gilson is intending it: “According to pure theologism, Christian philosophy signifies Christianity without philosophy, and the unity of both terms is produced by confusing philosophy with religion.” (“The Notion of Christian Philosophy,” 133; French edition, 43.) While he does not go into detail in that work, one can see even here that the phrase is used to signify a kind of conflation or *formal confusion* of philosophy and Christianity. The next major work where I have found the notion is in *Christianity and Philosophy*, where however the actual phrase is absent. Cf. Étienne Gilson, *Christianisme et Philosophie* (Paris: Vrin, 1936), translated by Ralph MacDonald as *Christianity and Philosophy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939). In that work Gilson offers several attitudes regarding the relationship between Christianity and philosophy which he re-

will develop this notion of *theologism* additionally in his 1938 *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*. For our purposes, the treatment of *theologism* in these two works is helpful for enlightening how Gilson's doctrine on Christian philosophy continued to develop in the later 1930s. Against the accusation that the phrase "Christian philosophy" implies formally conflating philosophy and theology, Gilson responds by showing precisely what it means to formally conflate them, and also how St. Thomas—the example *par excellence* for Christian philosophy—is not guilty of this either. Furthermore, I hope to show how a better understanding of the phrase will help interpret Gilson's later writings on Christian philosophy more accurately.

As he begins Chapter 2 of *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, Gilson explains how *logicism*—the encroachment of philosophers by means of an overextension of logic upon theology—helped to produce an aversion and reaction against logic. This encroachment of logic upon theology was common in the late 11th and 12th Centuries and led to a reaction against not only logic but against philosophy in general, as philosophy as such was considered to be synonymous with logic by many theologians of the Middle Ages. Theologians held this reduction of philosophy to logic due to the fact that many professors of logic were considered to be philosophers simply speaking without distinction. As he explains,

The only thing [the theologians] were conscious of on this point was that the men who were teaching logic were also the men whom everybody called philosophers, and who were themselves

gards to be deficient either for its hostility to philosophy, for its conflation of philosophy within theology, or even for its deprecation of nature. Cf. *Christianity and Philosophy*, 6–13. Though he does not call them theologism in that work, these attitudes are the ones he returns to in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* and *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* and explicitly refers to them as forms of theologism.

convinced that philosophy is nothing but logic applied to philosophical questions.²

Logicism had threatened the destruction of theology, and because of this, it threatened the salvation of souls. Therefore, some theologians felt the need to respond to it by the removal of philosophy as a whole, though, precisely how that was to be done took different forms. Gilson explains the matter in the following way:

As theologians, their task was not to save philosophy from logicism, but, through faith and grace, to save mankind from eternal perdition. Any obstacle that stood in the way of this had to be carefully removed, be it philosophy itself. But what was the best way for theology to get rid of philosophy was a rather intricate question.³

One response to this among theologians, Gilson notes, was to attempt the complete eradication of philosophy, precisely because they regarded philosophy at best to be useless and unnecessary or at worst to be inimical to the Faith:

Wherever there is a theology, or merely a faith, there are overzealous theologians and believers to preach that pious souls have no use for philosophical knowledge, and that philosophical speculation is basically inconsistent with a sincere religious life. Among those who favour such an attitude, there are some of a rather crude type, but others are very intelligent men, whose speculative power is by no means inferior to their religious zeal. The only difference between such men and true philosophers is that instead of using their reason in behalf of philosophy, they turn their natural ability against it.⁴

² Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 32.

³ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

Though he does not explicitly call this attitude of the “very intelligent men” who have used their reason against philosophy to be *theologism* here in this work or previously where he mentioned this fact in *Christianity and Philosophy*, Gilson here as elsewhere presents it along with specifically *theologistic* doctrines as a kindred reaction against the proper relationship between philosophy and theology by a theologian.⁵ In this first case the theologian does violence to philosophy by trying to purge every element of philosophy from Christian speculation, while *theologism proper*, at least as he presents it in *Unity*, does so by formally merging philosophy within theology, as can be seen in the following way.

Recognizing the detriment to theology brought about by the destruction of philosophy, Gilson notes that some theologians sought to reject philosophy not by its direct destruction but by merging philosophy within theology and thereby taming it: “Instead of attempting to kill it by discrediting the work of the philosophers, some divines have thought it better to tame and, so to speak, to domesticate philosophy by merging it in theology.”⁶ This *tamed philosophy completely within theology* is what he is hinting at to be *theologism* in a rigorous sense. Philosophy in this sense is regarded to be good, but for these thinkers who are guilty of this attitude, absolute truth can only be found in revealed theology. Therefore, philosophy is subsumed into it and made to be shown to be in accord with it. As Gilson explains in the following way, “On the other hand, where the revealed truth is, by hypothesis, absolute

⁵ In a moment, we will see that in *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* he explicitly calls this attitude a form of theologism. For now, we will call it a doctrine *kindred to theologism* as it was a kind of *proto-theologism*. One could say that it is analogous to *theologism proper*, and could also call it *theologism in a loose sense*.

⁶ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 36. Still, more specific examples of how theologistic doctrines merge philosophy into theology will be provided in a moment in our treatment of *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*. We will pass over that point for right now to focus on other aspects of theologism that Gilson does focus more upon in *Unity*.

truth, the only way to save philosophy is to show that its teaching is substantially the same as that of revealed religion.”⁷ This is not the same as affirming the unity of truth whereby true philosophy will always be in accord with the truths of Christian theology. Were that the case at hand, there would be no problem at all, and therefore no theologism present. Rather in the theologism in a rigorous sense that he is explaining, it is the *way* in which the theologian uses philosophy that is the problem, as is evinced in what follows.

Gilson then gives not a definition but a description for the *theologism* that is at work in such a situation:

Owing to the seriousness of their purpose, as well as to their boldness in dealing with the highest metaphysical problems, such doctrines have often been a source of philosophical progress. They look like philosophy, they talk like philosophy, they sometimes are studied or taught in schools under the name of philosophy: yet, in point of fact, they are little more than theologies clothed in philosophical garb. Let us call such an attitude Theologism and see how it works.⁸

However, what it means for theologism to be called a theology “clothed in philosophical garb” will require further clarification based upon common characteristics. A first common characteristic he offers for doctrines maintaining an attitude of theologism is an overly pious feeling which, in the hopes of acknowledging the glory of God, often leads to the annihilation of nature as its furthest consequence:

The deeper [this religious feeling] is, the better it is; but it is one thing to experience a certain feeling deeply, and another thing to allow it to dictate, uncontrolled by reason, a completely rounded interpretation of the world. When and where piety is permitted to inundate the philosophical field, the usual outcome is that, the

⁷ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 36–37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

better to extol the glory of God, pious-minded theologians proceed joyfully to annihilate God's own creation.⁹

Relating this back to Gilson's treatment in *Christianity and Philosophy* (alluded to in note 1), one can see that even if a given thinker does not support an annihilation of nature and philosophy, *theologism* often maintains an attitude which deprecates nature, reason, and philosophy in some way, which plants the seeds for later thinkers to draw out what might have been but unintended consequences in the earlier thinkers.

Gilson notes a common sequence of events for the development and breakdown of these theological doctrines:

In such a case the sequence of doctrines too often runs in the following way: with the best intentions in the world, some theologian suggests, as a philosophically established truth, that God is and does everything, while nature and man are and do nothing; then comes a philosopher who grants the theologian's success in proving that nature is powerless, but emphasizes his failure to prove that there is a God. Hence the logical conclusion that nature is wholly deprived of reality and intelligibility. This is scepticism, and it cannot be avoided in such cases.¹⁰

Thus, seeking to affirm God's omnipotence, a theologian might overly attribute to God and the order of grace to the detriment of the order of nature and of secondary efficient causality. The next stage is for a philosopher to come along and champion the theologian's devaluing of nature and, seeing philosophy to be useless, they hold to the necessary consequence that there can be no true demonstrations for God's existence. A denuded nature that is empty of intelligibility cannot possibly be a starting point for proving the existence of God, nor can a philosophy that is regarded as useless. Therefore, Gilson sees that *theologistic*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

doctrines tend—in the end of the process of development from initiator through disciple or disciples—toward ending in *scepticism*.

The first clear historical example of *theologism* that Gilson provides is the doctrine of the Asharites, who were an Islamic sect of the 9th and 10th Centuries, founded by Al Ashari (873–935). Gilson notes the following of Al Ashari:

As a matter of fact, were Ashari to be credited with but a small part of the philosophical positions that were held later on in his school, the truth would be that his way of understanding it was to render everything to God and nothing to man. His doctrine is a remarkable instance of what happens to philosophy when it is handled by theologians, according to theological methods, for a theological end.¹¹

Careful attention must be paid to this text as it provides three key characteristics or ingredients for this theologism in a strict sense. At first glance the last sentence could be very problematic for considering what Gilson has said previously—*viz.* that Christian philosophy is most properly found, though not exclusively, in service to theology, as he maintained in *Christianity and Philosophy*¹²—but also, for what he *will* say in a few short years in the fifth edition of *Le Thomisme* (1944)¹³—

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹² Cf. Gilson, *Christianity and Philosophy*, 96–97: “Unless, therefore, the existence of God, His Unity, Creative Power, and all the attributes knowable by natural reason, but revealed by God Himself, which are prescribed to all as things that must be believed, are excluded from those things *quae ad religionem pertinent*, it seems hardly possible to avoid the conclusion that the natural theology of the Christian is at the service of his supernatural theology. But it is precisely in this state of service that it finds itself as philosophy.”

¹³ Étienne Gilson, *Le Thomisme: Introduction à la Philosophie de Saint Thomas d’Aquin*, 5ed rev. et aug. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1944), translated by L. K. Shook as *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956), 9: “Everything in the *Summa* is theological, yet, elements of genuinely philosophical nature are part and parcel of Thomistic theology precisely because, according to St. Thomas himself, the distinction between theology and philosophy does not adequately answer the distinction between faith and reason. As will be seen later on, his theology requires the

viz. that Christian philosophy is often found used by the theologian for a *theological end*. Given that Gilson readily finds St. Thomas's Christian philosophy present within his theological works, Gilson is not saying *theologism* occurs merely when a *theologian* uses philosophy for a *theological end*. That second element above is the key ingredient for this poisonous potion—*viz.* using philosophy according to *theological methods*. It is there that *philosophy* is not really at the service of theology but is annihilated by it. Hence, we are not talking about a theologian who, for example, after acknowledging God's existence based upon revelation proceeds to demonstrate it or any other of the preambles of faith. Philosophy may be used in such a case according to the end of the theologian—for example, possibly for the conversion of non-believers—but still according to *philosophical method*, that is, by means of syllogisms that contain open house data in their premises.

Thus, for Gilson's conception of theologism, all three of these ingredients are necessary, but most especially that of using philosophy according to *theological method*. An example of this that Gilson will show later on is when a theologian attempts to demonstrate what is *de iure* indemonstrable, that is, any of the content of the *mysteries* or *articles of faith*, as for example, the Trinity or the Hypostatic Union. Further still, one can see that Gilson also has in mind the following: in theologistic doctrines, while the use of philosophy is for a *theological end*, that notion of end takes on a *radical, hyperbolic manner*. It is not just a question of demonstrating preambles of faith—which is perfectly in accord with the theologian's proper use of philosophy—but rather it involves a radical reduction of the *end* at work, that is, that philosophy can be used for apologetical purposes *only*. Thus, in such a scenario,

collaboration of purely philosophical elements used in view of an essentially theological end.”

apologetics is all that philosophy is good for.¹⁴ Yet, it should be noted that to use philosophy for an apologetical purpose is not a problem unless that is *all that philosophy is good for* with no value in addition to the aid it brings to theology.

Additionally, Gilson proceeds by offering a long quotation from Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, where Rabbi Moses is commenting upon the common treatment of philosophy by some early Christian and Muslim thinkers such as the Asharites:

We merely maintain that the earlier theologians, both of the Greek Christians and of the Mohammedans, when they laid down their propositions, did not investigate the real properties of things; first of all they considered what must be the properties of the things which should yield proof for or against a certain creed; and when this was found they asserted that the thing must be endowed with those properties; then they employed the same assertion as a proof for the identical arguments which had led to the assertion, and by which they either supported or refuted a certain opinion.¹⁵

Based upon what Gilson quotes of Rabbi Moses, certain early Christian and early Muslim thinkers were not just guilty of employing philosophy for apologetical purposes. Rather, they were engaged in an enterprise in which philosophical, inductive reasoning about nature and its causes was replaced with deductive, *a priori* reasoning about the constitution of what nature should have in order to function as a proof for various theological propositions. This sheds further light upon what

¹⁴ Many of the early Church Fathers may very well have been guilty of such an attitude. In a text where Gilson comments upon the early Church's use of philosophy as noted in the work of Maimonides, he says the following: "In short, as we would say today, the philosophy of these Christians was but that particular branch of theology which we call apologetics." (Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 40.)

¹⁵ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 40–41, quoting from Moses Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, 2nd ed., trans. M. Friedlander (London: Routledge, 1928), 109–110.

Gilson means by theologism's use of philosophy according to a theological way of deduction from a revealed datum to what nature should be. Moreover, what is common among the noted early Christian and Asharite doctrines is an attitude toward philosophy and toward nature itself. As Gilson says reflecting upon Maimonides' analysis,

Accusing their authors of not being interested in the real nature of things would have been a cheap criticism, though a true one. What Maimonides has clearly perceived, with remarkable insight, is that even these men themselves were aware of the fact, and that, in a sense, their whole doctrine was but a toilsome justification of their attitude. Knowing, as they did, that their statements were open to that criticism, they assumed that it was quite useless to worry about the real nature and order of things, because things have indeed neither nature nor order.¹⁶

Thus, such theologistic doctrines disregarded a philosophy unmerged with theology that was concerned with the nature of things, because *nature itself*, meaning the world of physical things, was disregarded as lacking *naturae* (i.e., essences ordered toward operation), as well as lacking the order and intelligibility that would otherwise result from them.

In an important text that sheds much light upon Gilson's understanding of *theologism* and the opposing *proper attitude* toward philosophy and nature, he comments upon G. K. Chesterton's *Father Brown* series, particularly referring to the first of the series titled "The Blue Cross:"

In one of his best novels, G. K. Chesterton introduces a very simple priest who finds out that a man, though clothed as a priest, is not a priest but a common thief; when the man asks him what made him sure that he was not a priest, Father Brown simply an-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41–42.

swers: "You attacked reason. It's bad theology."¹⁷ Father Brown was obviously a sound Thomist.¹⁸

Gilson is here referring to a scene in which Father Brown has been attempting to attract the police in order to thwart a heinous crime. The great thief Flambeau is disguised as a priest in the hopes of stealing Fr. Brown's jeweled cross, which the humble, old, priest-detective is taking on his journey to a Eucharistic Congress. As the renowned French detective Valentin catches up to them, he overhears Father Brown and the thief-in-priestly-guise already in a deep discussion. Here Flambeau reveals a kind of popular scepticism in a form of "possible worlds" in which our notion of reason and the reasonable might in fact really be *unreasonable*:

'Ah, yes, these modern infidels appeal to their reason; but who can look at those millions of worlds and not feel that there may well be wonderful universes above us where reason is utterly unreasonable?'¹⁹

In direct response, Fr. Brown replies,

'No,' said the other priest; 'reason is always reasonable, even in the last limbo, in the lost borderland of things. I know that people charge the Church with lowering reason, but it is just the other way. Alone on earth, the Church makes reason really supreme. Alone on earth, the Church affirms that God himself is bound by reason.'²⁰

For Gilson, Chesterton—a life-trained philosopher if there ever was one—enunciates a popular brand of *theologism* in Flambeau's words, even if not precisely the kind that merges philosophy into theol-

¹⁷ G. K. Chesterton, "The Blue Cross," in *Father Brown: The Essential Tales* (New York: The Modern Library, 2005), 22.

¹⁸ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 48.

¹⁹ Chesterton, "The Blue Cross," 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

ogy. The thief-in-priest's-clothing, like a lion in sheep's wool, speaks as a bad theologian affirming the possibility of the irrationality of reason and of the lack of certitude that can be maintained in reason's findings. This is what Chesterton's Fr. Brown finds to be revealing of Flambeau's true nature and identity. This was the attack upon reason which Chesterton regarded to be "bad theology" and which Gilson highlighted briefly in order to point toward the doctrine of St. Thomas as antidote to it.

Moreover, Gilson then proceeds to speak of St. Thomas on these matters. As he says in the subsequent text:

[St. Thomas] was too great a theologian to indulge in an attitude in which theology has no less to lose than has philosophy itself; but he took an interest in it, first as an artist, for there is something fascinating in a blunder so consistently executed; and secondly as a theologian, because he knew many good men infected by this same disease, some of whom would have branded him as a pagan for his stubbornness in dealing with philosophical problems in a purely philosophical way.²¹

Notice that Gilson affirms that St. Thomas held interest in philosophy *as a theologian*. Theologism does not merely consist in a theologian's interest in and use of philosophy. The key expressed here is that the proper use of philosophy by a theologian follows St. Thomas's lead in that he solves *philosophical problems in a philosophical way*, that is, through philosophical reasoning based upon first principles and premises which contain open house data from the natural world, objects which do not *de iure* require religious belief in order for acceptance.

Nevertheless, Gilson returns to present another doctrine which he believes to have fallen into a form of *theologism*, at least in some way, and this is none other than the doctrine of the Seraphic Doctor, St. Bonaventure. In this process, Gilson acknowledges that he was a great theo-

²¹ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 48–49.

logian (in fact, the greatest Franciscan theologian), but also truly a philosopher:

A General Minister of the Franciscan Order, St. Bonaventura was, and still remains, the most perfect exponent of Franciscan theology, that is, of a theology thoroughly imbued with the religious genius of St. Francis of Assisi. Besides being one of the greatest figures in the history of speculative mysticism, St. Bonaventura was a philosopher.²²

In this way, it should *not* be said that Gilson considered St. Bonaventura guilty of theologism *through and through in all respects* of his doctrine, for otherwise, how would such predications as “the most perfect exponent of Franciscan theology” and “philosopher” be merited? Likewise, if Gilson sees St. Bonaventura to have been truly a philosopher—as he does clearly at least from early in his career and even here now in the publication of *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*—Gilson cannot be accusing him of the broad “kindred” form of theologism which denies the possibility of philosophy (i.e., the first type that we discussed above as a reaction to *logicism*). Nor does it seem that he is accusing him of the more “rigorous” sense of theologism which merges philosophy into theology. Rather, what he finds in the great Franciscan’s doctrine is the other theologistic tendency spoken of which, in order to exalt the Divine and the order of grace, at times falls into diminishing the order of nature and philosophy. Gilson suggests that in the process of seeking to *reduce* (i.e., *lead back*) philosophy and all of the arts to theology, St. Bonaventura has maintained a diminished

²² *Ibid.*, 49. Later Gilson will respond to Pierre Mandonnet by conceding that St. Bonaventura really was primarily a theologian, and will stop calling him also a philosopher. Here in *Unity*, however, this shift has not yet been made. Cf. Étienne Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, trans. Cécile Gilson (New York: Random House, 1962), 92–95.

form of philosophy and of nature.²³ Providing his own response to what he believes to be St. Bonaventure's project, Gilson maintains,

If you want a theology in order to bring all the other sciences back to God, your first requisite is of course a theology; and if you want to refer your philosophy to God, what you need first is a philosophy—a philosophy, I repeat, that is wholly and exclusively a philosophy, and which, because it is a philosophy, can be related to theology without being reduced to it.²⁴

Thus, Gilson is not saying that a theologian cannot make use of philosophy for theological purposes. However, he insists that philosophy will only be of real use to the theologian if it is already properly established *qua* philosophy, maintaining its formal distinction from theology as such.

Gilson goes on to provide an example of what he believes to show St. Bonaventure's diminished view of nature in his doctrine of grace and nature. He contends that Bonaventure felt it the safer path to attribute more to grace and less to nature, in order to avoid a kind of presumption and impiety.²⁵ However, Gilson rejects this attitude, saying that, if it is permissible to attribute a little less to nature, at what point do we stop in this process of diminution:

²³ R. E. Houser contends that Gilson's understanding of *reductio* in Bonaventure is in fact a reductionism in the modern sense of the term. In short, as Houser contends, Bonaventure's notion of reduction is, "a positive kind, where analysis of one thing opens the mind to another, not the negative reduction which eliminates one in favor of the other." (R. E. Houser, "Bonaventure's Three-fold Way to God," *Philosophy* 6 [1997]: 97.) Nevertheless, whether Gilson's reading of Bonaventure is accurate or not is entirely tangential to the purpose of this essay. What is of value for our purposes is *why* Gilson regards St. Bonaventure to be guilty of theologism or of theologistic tendencies in light of better understanding Gilson's developing doctrine on Christian philosophy. Still, if Bonaventure is guilty of attributing more to God and less to the nature that He has created, the Seraphic Doctor is at least guilty of a theologistic tendency, even if he was disciplined in this regard and kept these sentiments to a minimum.

²⁴ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 50.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 51.

If, on the contrary, you start on the assumption that it is safer to keep a little below the line, where are you going to stop? Why, indeed, should you stop at all? Since it is pious to lessen the efficacy of free will, it is more pious to lessen it a little more, and to make it utterly powerless should be the highest mark of piety. In fact, there will be mediaeval theologians who come very close to that conclusion, and even reach it a long time before the age of Luther and Calvin.²⁶

Ultimately, such a position could lead and did lead to similar conclusions regarding nature and free will that were maintained by Luther and Calvin. Still, Gilson acknowledges that Bonaventure would reject such a move and in no way accuses him of it. The question is whether his principles guard against such a move or not: "Nothing, of course, would have been more repellent to St. Bonaventura than such a doctrine; the only question here is: was St. Bonaventura protected against it?"²⁷

Additionally, Gilson contends that St. Bonaventure's religious sentiment sometimes affected his philosophy. One example he provides concerns two different ways of viewing efficient causality in Bonaventure. As Gilson explains,

First, he could favour the view that where there is efficient causality, something new, which we call effect, is brought into existence by the efficacy of its cause; in this case, every effect can be rightly considered as a positive addition to the already existing order of reality. Or St. Bonaventura could maintain, with St. Augustine, that God has created all things present and future at the very instant of creation. From this second point of view, any particular being, taken at any time of world history, should be considered, so to speak, as the seed of all those other beings, or events, that are to flow from it according to the laws of divine providence.²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

In short, the first notion of efficient causality would be maintained by thinkers such as St. Thomas and preserves the efficacy of secondary efficient causes as real causes of existence in the natural world. However, it is this second notion which diminishes that efficacy of secondary efficient causes—as created things could in no way be called causes of existence of new things—and which he has explicitly attributed to Bonaventure, that Gilson finds to be problematic:

It is typical of St. Bonaventura's theologism that he always clung to this second interpretation of causality. He never could bring himself to think that efficient causality is attended by the springing up of new existences. To him, such a view practically amounted to crediting creatures with a creative power that belongs only to God.²⁹

Furthermore, Gilson asserts that this view of a nature bereft of real efficient causality has much in common with the position of both Malebranche and Al Ashari:

If, in the beginning, God created, together with all that was, all that was to be, the end of the world story was in its beginning, and nothing can really happen to it; in such a system God is the only efficient cause, and this world of ours is a completely barren world, just as in the doctrine of Malebranche and of Al Ashari.³⁰

Further light is shed on Gilson's understanding of theologism in his 1938 *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*—the 1937 Richards Lectures at the University of Virginia. While much of what he said about theologism in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* is repeated, Gilson provides additional clarity on this topic through his division of the history of Christian thought according to *spiritual families*. Gilson states at the outset of this work that his goal is to provide a sketch of the main spiritual families that influenced the thought of the Middle Ages.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 53–54.

As he says, "But we can hope to achieve, if not a description of those seven centuries of abstract speculation, at least a sketch of the main spiritual families which were responsible for the copious philosophical and theological literature of the Middle Ages."³¹

The first family will be categorized as one in which revelation completely replaces philosophy as there is no need for it:

The first of those spiritual families, and the only one we will now attempt to characterize, was made up of those theologians according to whom Revelation had been given to men as a substitute for all other knowledge, including science, ethics and metaphysics.³²

In short this position maintains: "[S]ince God has spoken to us, it is no longer necessary for us to think."³³ One can see that Gilson is again presenting, first, the doctrine in which theologians cast off philosophy at least as unnecessary if not as inimical to the Faith. We previously called this a "kindred" doctrine to theologism or *theologism in a loose sense*—though that is not Gilson's term for it—as it historically preceded or accompanied the theologism in the rigorous sense which he spoke of in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*.

Moreover, members of this spiritual family are characterized as supporting the very self-sufficiency of Christian Revelation, such a position that Gilson notes has had numerous proponents historically speaking: "This absolute conviction in the self-sufficiency of Christian Revelation has always found decided supporters."³⁴ As he says further, "[I]ts representatives are always there, but it becomes vocal chiefly during such times when philosophy is threatening to invade the field of

³¹ Étienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Scribner's, 1938), 4–5.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8. Gilson includes in this family Tatian, St. Bernard, St. Peter Damien, and the Franciscan Spirituals. Cf. *ibid.*, 11–14.

Revelation.”³⁵ Not specifically referred to in this text in *Reason and Revelation*, Gilson is alluding to what he had mentioned in *Unity*, viz. that this doctrine has often been found in response to *logicism’s* encroachments upon theology. Consequently, this family maintains a hostility toward philosophy, oftentimes regarding it as the source of error and heresy.³⁶ Gilson mentions Tertullian to be the primary example of this view of revelation and philosophy, to such an extent that he names this family, the “Tertullian family.”³⁷ In a key text Gilson summarizes what he regards to be the common characteristics of this family:

Emphasis laid upon three or four texts of Saint Paul, always the same, and exclusion of all his other statements about our natural knowledge of God, and the existence, nay, the binding force of a natural moral law; unqualified condemnation of Greek philosophy, as though no Greek philosopher had ever said anything true concerning the nature of God, of man and of our destiny; bitter hatred, and vicious attacks especially directed against Dialectics, as if it were possible even to condemn Dialectics without making use of it; the tracing back of heresies against religious dogmas to the pernicious influence of philosophical speculation upon theological knowledge; last, not the least, the crude statement of an absolute opposition between religious faith in the word of God and the use of natural reason in matters pertaining to Revelation . . .³⁸

Thus, one sees five common characteristics laid out: first, the relying on the authority of and the absolutizing of the few texts where St. Paul seemingly condemns philosophy; second, the condemnation of all Greek philosophy without reservation or qualification; third, attacking the science of dialectical logic, ironically without regard for the need to

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

use logic in order to do so; fourth, focusing upon the erroneous philosophical foundations in numerous theological heresies as a way of showing that heresy in general was due to the general encroachment of philosophy upon theology; and lastly, setting up a complete opposition between religious faith in revelation and the use of unaided reason in those matters that involve revelation, that is, as a rational component within theology as *ancilla*. Furthermore, unlike in *Christianity and Philosophy* and *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, Gilson explicitly refers to the position of this family to be a form of *theologism*, in fact calling it at one point a “radical theologism.”³⁹

In addition, Gilson condemns this type of theologism outright as having produced a “darkness” not only in philosophy and science, but in the theology which it had so championed:

Had the Middle Ages produced men of this type only, the period would fully deserve the title of Dark Ages which it is commonly given. It would deserve the name not only from the point of view of science and of philosophy, but from that of theology as well.⁴⁰

Therefore, such a position was not only bad for philosophy, but similar to the sentiment of Chesterton's Fr. Brown quoted in *Unity*, in attacking reason it was bad for theology. Not mentioned specifically in *Reason and Revelation*, the Tertullian family is in a certain sense the realization of Flambeau's possible world in which reason was regarded to be unreasonable—except, it was not some other world but the one we live in.

Gilson moves on to consider the second family of Christian thought regarding the relationship of revelation and philosophy, which he notes to be a marked improvement with positive results:

Fortunately, the history of Christian thought attests the existence of another spiritual family, much more enlightened than the first

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

one, and whose untiring efforts to blend religious faith with rational speculations have achieved really important results.⁴¹

In this group, there is an affirmation of the value of philosophy and its fundamental conformity with revelation. However, one should keep in mind that it is presented in a section devoted to spiritual families that assert the primacy of faith, and likewise where he seems to insinuate subtly that the examples given hold that primacy *in an exaggerated way*. He then offers as examples of this family such thinkers as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, but most especially St. Augustine, because of whom he names the group the “Augustinian family.”⁴² What then are the general characteristics of this family?

Firstly, one can see in St. Augustine the importance of beginning with an act of faith in Christian revelation before proceeding into philosophy. Referring to the point of Augustine’s conversion, Gilson comments the following:

From that time on, Augustine was never to forget that the safest way to reach truth is not the one that starts from reason and then goes on from rational certitude to faith, but, on the contrary, the way whose starting point is faith and then goes on from Revelation to reason.⁴³

Thus, he is alluding precisely to Augustine’s conversion-influenced pedagogical principle: *Nisi credideritis, non intelligetis*. While, however, Gilson reveres Augustine and the numerous other proponents of this attitude of compatibility and mutual nourishment of faith and reason and of Christianity and philosophy, this treatment here is presented in such a way that Gilson finds it to be somehow imperfect or deficient without some qualification or correction. As we proceed further, one

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

will see how Gilson now⁴⁴ maintains a hesitancy toward this attitude, even with the many positive advantages to it. In truth, the key characteristic which here sets this family apart from Greek philosophy is *the obligatory character of beginning with an act of religious faith for proceeding into philosophy*: “No Greek philosopher could have ever dreamt of making religious faith in some revealed truth the *obligatory starting point of rational knowledge*.”⁴⁵ It is this obligatory character of faith which Gilson has soured upon greatly.

In later works, he will still maintain the importance of faith in Christian revelation having historically influenced the development of philosophy. Yet, against accusations that he has conflated philosophy and theology or that he has fallen into a form of fideism, he must reject the idea that a prior act of faith is *de iure obligatory* for the development of a true philosophy. That true philosophies *have historically developed* under the inspiration of Christian faith, is not a problem for Gilson. It is a statement of fact that it happened, as is supremely evinced in his *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*. However, to say that an act of faith is *necessary* for beginning philosophy as such, is too strong an assertion and thus Gilson shies away from it in this 1938 work. It is one thing to say that Christian faith has in fact positively influenced the development of a true philosophy with certain characteristics due specifically to that influence. It is another thing to say that unless you start with an act of faith you cannot participate in the fruits of that philosophy. Gilson was and remained an advocate of the former, and is setting the record straight that he does not accept the latter.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Just seven years earlier, Gilson called the similarly formulated Augustinian-Anselmian pedagogical principles, *credo ut intelligam* and *fides quaerens intellectum*, the “true definition of Christian philosophy.” (Gilson, “The Notion of Christian Philosophy,” 138.)

⁴⁵ Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, 17 [my emphasis].

⁴⁶ In earlier works Gilson did not endorse the implicit obligatory character of faith implied in Augustine’s *Nisi credideritis, non intelligetis* or in Augustine and Anselm’s

Still, St. Augustine's attitude of the necessity of faith to precede philosophical activity, led to a new era, as Gilson says, in which theologians were the greatest philosophers: "With St. Augustine, on the contrary, a new age was beginning, in which by far the highest type of philosophical thinking would be that of the theologians."⁴⁷ While the fullness of truth could not be obtained by the Christian in this life, a small participation in that truth could be through faith and through the rational understanding of the content of revelation. As Gilson says, explaining St. Augustine,

[H]ence, already in this life, his passionate effort to investigate the mysteries of Revelation by the natural light of reason. The result of such an effort is precisely what Augustine used to call *intellectus*; *understanding*, that is to say, some rational insight into the contents of Revelation, human reason groping its way towards the full light of the beatific vision.⁴⁸

Hence, the believer in this life seeks as much *intellectus* of the contents of faith as can be attained, as a way of working in this life towards that Truth and Goodness which will be fully attained in the life to come. It is in light of this view of revelation and reason, Gilson explains, that St. Augustine developed the notion of believing in order that one may come to understand: "Such is the ultimate meaning of Augustine's famous formula: 'Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore seek not to understand that thou mayest believe, but believe that thou mayest

Crede ut intelligas / Credo ut intelligam. Speaking as a historian, his focus was upon the fact of Christian faith having influenced the development of philosophy. In earlier works he was silent on the possible accusation of fideism for championing these texts of Augustine and Anselm. However, here in *Reason and Revelation* he concedes the validity of the critique and modified his position accordingly.

⁴⁷ Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, 17. Gilson had no problem with this in previous works or in later ones. It is a historical fact that the greatest Christian philosophers have also been theologians, and that their philosophies have been found within theological treatises primarily.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

understand.”⁴⁹ For Augustine and those of his spiritual family, it is from believing that one comes to understand. Hence, for Gilson, they are in unison regarding this fundamental principle:

All the members of the Augustinian family resemble one another by their common acceptance of the fundamental principle: unless you believe, you shall not understand. Moreover, being Christians, all of them agree that the only conceivable faith is faith in Christian Revelation.⁵⁰

While the similarities in members of the Augustinian family exist in upholding the same faith and its necessity for attaining philosophical understanding, Gilson notes that the differences among these thinkers lie in how they employ reason:

You cannot fail to know an Augustinian when you meet one in history, but it is not an easy thing to guess what he is going to say. The reason for it is, that while all the members of the family hold the same faith, in whatever places and times they happen to live, not all of them use their understanding in the same way.⁵¹

Gilson maintains that all of those whom he is describing as part of the Augustinian family—*viz.* Augustine chiefly, but also St. Bonaventure, St. Anselm, and even Malebranche—agree that, “unless we believe, we shall not understand; and all of them agree as to what we should believe, but they do not always agree as to what it is to understand.”⁵²

Gilson will then shift to the next great member of the Augustinian family, St. Anselm of Canterbury, who in one sense sought greatly to be a faithful follower of St. Augustine's method. As Gilson notes, “Anselm, not Augustine, is responsible for the famous formula: *credo*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 19, quoting from Saint Augustine, “On the Gospel of Saint John,” XXIX, 6, in *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John*, vol. I, trans. H. Browne (Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1848), 410.

⁵⁰ Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, 21.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 22.

ut intelligam.”⁵³ Indeed, Anselm agreed whole heartedly with Augustine’s *nisi credideritis* and his *crede ut intelligas*, so much so that he reformulated them into his own motto—I believe that I may understand—all the while keeping that obligatory sense of faith in revelation for coming to rational understanding.⁵⁴ Yet, for all he owed St. August-

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁴ Gilson had, as we have mentioned before, called both St. Augustine’s formula and St. Anselm’s reiteration of it first the “definition of Christian philosophy” (cf. “The Notion of Christian Philosophy,” 139) and he later called them the “method of Christian philosophy” (cf. Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy: Gifford Lectures 1931-1932* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936], 52). However, in a 1934 essay titled “Sens et nature de l’argument de saint Anselme,” Gilson explicitly denies that such formulae as *credo ut intelligam* and *fides quaerens intellectum* to be the method of Christian philosophy. In the text of the essay itself, he explains how St. Anselm and like thinkers who necessitate faith for beginning philosophy set limitations upon it: “Let us say, further, that if this knowledge can only be concerned with faith, it is that faith itself, in seeking understanding, gives birth to it. Can knowledge be considered part of philosophy, which, if only to be engendered, demands an act of faith? What if it is knowledge that at each instant of its development, and even if it is not deduced from faith, demands the presence of this act of faith? Finally, what if it is rational knowledge, where the act of faith survives, however necessary that knowledge’s conclusions may be? One can try to maintain it, but it will be hard to believe, and I think it is better to renounce it.” (Étienne Gilson, “The Meaning and Nature of St. Anselm’s Argument,” in his *Medieval Essays*, trans. James G. Colbert [Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011], 76.) Indeed, can something be philosophy if it *de iure* demands an act of faith? Some will find this to be the criticism long missing for Anselm and Augustine’s apparent requirement for faith in order to engage in philosophical understanding. Gilson will concede to Van Steenberghen that such a view of Christian philosophy will set too much of a limitation upon philosophy and formally rejects this as the proper *method* for a Christian philosopher: “Thus, with Van Steenberghen (‘L’Hommage,’ 504), I reject the expressions I have used on occasion, although I no longer know where: Christian philosophers move *within a faith*. There are grounds also to correct the expression in *L’esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (1:37) that seems to admit that *fides quaerens intellectum* defines the method of Christian philosophy. The history of Christian philosophy will never be written without St. Anselm, nor without many other thinkers, the majority of whom were theologians (including St. Thomas Aquinas), but if St. Anselm greatly enriched Christian philosophy, I believe that there is an ambition and an exclusive limitation in his expression that prevent our seeing the definition of the attitude of a Christian philosopher in it. I take this occasion to thank Van Steenberghen for his most courteous criticisms.” (Gilson, “The Meaning and Nature of St. Anselm’s Argument,” 76–77, footnote 65.) However, much of what he calls Christian philosophy is in fact

tine in inspiration, St. Anselm entered philosophical thinking within a different context—not at a time of ascendancy for platonic and neoplatonic philosophical thought, and also not after a conversion from paganism, but as a Christian monk in a milieu in which rational knowledge was equated with logic:

But Anselm wrote his treatises during the last years of the eleventh century; he had not gone through the ordeal of Augustine's conversion and was not indebted to Plato, nor to Plotinus, for his discovery of what intellectual knowledge actually is. To him, as to all his contemporaries, rational knowledge was logical knowledge.⁵⁵

For Anselm and other Christian thinkers of his time and circumstances, many eventually sought after logical demonstrations even for revealed truths, due to the heavy emphasis on logic of the time period:

In short, in Anselm's own times, the standard science was Logic. Under such circumstances, the same endeavor, to achieve a rational understanding of Christian faith, was bound to result in a new translation of Christian beliefs into terms of logical demonstration.⁵⁶

Even St. Anselm's proof for the existence of God, the so called *Ontological Argument*, is rooted in his capacity as a logician. Ultimately, St. Anselm seeks to prove *a priori* that to conceive of God as not existing involves a contradiction. To do so is enough for him to prove that God must exist:

As a Christian, Anselm believes there is a God; as a logician, he concludes that the notion of a non-existing God is a self-con-

developed by theologians who have previously begun with faith and then proceeded to philosophical speculation. Can it be said that Gilson no longer says that Christian philosophy can be found in such cases? I think that is not the case, but much more will need to be said on how he continues to develop on this point later in his career.

⁵⁵ Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, 24.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

tradictory notion; since he can neither believe that there is no God, nor conceive it, there follows that God exists. By means of Logic alone, Anselm has achieved a rational understanding of Christian faith—the same faith as that of Augustine, but a different understanding.⁵⁷

With St. Anselm and his followers, it is not just a question of seeking to demonstrate what St. Thomas has called *preambles of faith*—those truths necessary for salvation and therefore revealed, but which are capable of being known and demonstrated philosophically. Rather, they sought even to demonstrate *articles of faith*—those properly revealed truths necessary for salvation which by nature are beyond unaided human reason's capacity to attain. As Gilson explains of St. Anselm and his disciples:

Once a Christian thinker gets to this point, nothing could prevent him from applying the same method to each of the Christian dogmas. And indeed Anselm of Canterbury, as well as his immediate disciples, remain famous in the history of theology for their recklessness in giving rational demonstrations of all revealed truths. To limit ourselves to Anselm himself, we find him proving, by conclusive dialectical arguments, not only the Trinity of the Divine Persons, as he did in both his *Monologium* and his *Proslogium*, but even the very Incarnation of Christ, including all its essential modalities, as he did in his *Cur Deus homo*.⁵⁸

While one may correctly note a change in Gilson's doctrine regarding St. Anselm, it is even more important to stress how this change is rooted in a continuity of Gilson's principles. As early as *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* and re-confirmed in *Christianity and Philosophy*, Gilson made clear that where he saw Christian philosophy to exist as the rational treatment and understanding of the contents of faith, he was specifically referring to a rational treatment of those objects which

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

could be known by reason alone but which had also been revealed—*viz. the preambles of faith*. Where a Christian thinker attempts not just a better understanding about the articles of faith, but a *demonstration* of them, this can in no way be an instantiation of Christian philosophy or of philosophy at all, because philosophy itself has been formally violated by the theologian. This is precisely what Gilson had referred to in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* as the mode of *theologism* where the theologian merges philosophy within theology in such a way as to do violence to philosophy by using it according to theological method.

Thus, as alluded to in the previously cited text, in those instances where Anselm attempts to demonstrate such things as the Trinity and the Incarnation, Gilson contends that he is formally guilty of *theologizing properly speaking*. Still, by implication, where Anselm respects the formal distinction of philosophy and theology and seeks to demonstrate only what is truly subject to undergo the process of demonstration, all the while correctly following the logical rules of demonstration, there does remain a philosophy or at least moments of genuine philosophizing. Moreover, if that philosophy was developed under Christian influence, it is in fact Christian philosophy. Hence, St. Anselm and others previously called *Christian philosophers* and producers of *Christian philosophy simpliciter* are now treated by Gilson as having some key methodological errors. Those errors are in light of fundamental principles for the relationship of philosophy and theology that Gilson has maintained for at least a decade to that point. On the other hand, any and all of these thinkers do contain Christian philosophy where their doctrines respect those principles.

Nevertheless, Gilson does not attribute Anselm's main *faux pas* to his spiritual father, St. Augustine. While St. Anselm follows St. Augustine in maintaining the primacy and necessity of faith for coming to understand, the great Archbishop of Canterbury is solely responsible

for his *theologistic* mode of procedure due to his own exaggerated use of logical demonstration:

This bold ambition to procure necessary reasons for the revealed dogmas had never entered the mind of Saint Augustine; but it was bound to follow from a merely dialectical treatment of Christian faith. The original character of the doctrine of Saint Anselm, and the peculiar aspect which it still offers to the investigating historian, have no other source and can be accounted for in no other way.⁵⁹

Though Gilson does not accuse St. Anselm at this specific point in *Reason and Revelation* of theologism, it clearly fits under the description given in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* of what we have been calling *theologism proper* or *in a strict sense*. In fact, later on in this work he does in fact formally speak of this teaching as St. Anselm's *theologism*.⁶⁰ However, it should be noted that not all Christian thinkers will make this encounter between Christian revelation and philosophy—albeit in the imperfect manner of reducing philosophical knowledge primarily to the understanding of faith—as profitably as St. Augustine and St. Anselm do in much of their overall doctrine. As Gilson explains of those who followed after these great doctors:

What more usually happens is, that instead of using science and philosophy to gain some insight into the rational meaning of Revelation, second-rate thinkers will use Revelation as a substitute for rational knowledge, not without causing serious damage to both Revelation and Reason.⁶¹

Thus, when the *formal distinction* between philosophy and theology are not maintained properly, the conflation of them leads to the destruction of both.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 81.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

Furthermore, Gilson is not accusing St. Augustine and St. Anselm of being guilty themselves of having destroyed philosophy and theology. Their doctrines contain certain theologistic principles and at *times* they are guilty either of theologism at least *in a loose sense*, that is, of *requiring Christian faith* in order to come to understand—as in the case of both of these men and of all thinkers of their common spiritual family—or of *theologism in a strict sense* in St. Anselm's case when he seeks to demonstrate *articles of faith*.⁶² Often times their doctrines contain to the great profit of the world much of what Gilson has already praised in his previous works regarding Christian philosophy. It is because of those doctrines that he had originally called these men

⁶² Here I would like to note the work of Gregory Sadler who admits that St. Anselm is guilty of seeking demonstrations for properly revealed doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation as Gilson explained, but still maintains all the while that even in such doctrines Anselm remains a Christian philosopher without qualification. Sadler says that according to the principles contained in “La notion de philosophie chrétienne”—Gilson's address to the *Société française de Philosophie* in 1931—and in *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* that St. Anselm was regarded then and still should be considered a Christian philosopher by Gilson. Nevertheless, Sadler's defense of Anselm is quite problematic for the imprecision with which he treats the principles of Gilson's earlier doctrine in those earlier works. He notes correctly that Gilson changes as early as his 1934 essay “Sens et nature de l'argument de saint Anselme” (*Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 9 (1934): 5–51) in his estimation of Anselm's doctrine as no longer being a model of Christian philosophy. Nevertheless, Sadler makes no mention of the fact that in *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* Gilson clearly maintains in principle that for Christian philosophy to exist *it must remain philosophy*. This clearly means that if Christian philosophers seek demonstrations for objects they attained previously through faith, such objects must be susceptible of demonstration—at least *de iure*—in order for that activity to be philosophy at all. Sadler thinks that when Gilson writes of this in *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* it is a sign of a “Thomistic shift” in Gilson's treatment of Christian philosophy. In truth, Thomistic it may be, but Gilson held this principle much earlier and only later came to see how Anselm among others violated it. Furthermore, Sadler thinks it unfair of Gilson to apply the “Thomistic” distinction of *articles of faith* and *preambles of faith* in a critique of Anselm, but as a matter of fact are there not really and truly some revealed objects of knowledge capable of demonstration and others which are not? How can it be unfair to question St. Anselm's treatment of *reality* when in fact he is supposed to be a philosopher? Cf. Gregory B. Sadler, “Saint Anselm's *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* as a Model for Christian Philosophy,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 32–58.

Christian philosophers. However, it is to second rate followers that he says take their principles down paths truly destructive of philosophy. Still, Gilson does not bring himself to say—despite the insufficiencies he sees in their principles—that St. Augustine and St. Anselm are not Christian philosophers in any sense at all.⁶³

In summary, in Chapter 2 of *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* and Chapter 1 of *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, Gilson provides four general tendencies of *theologistic doctrines*, all of which were hinted at in his earlier work *Christianity and Philosophy*, though not so named.

Gilson spoke of the general tendency of what he called the Tertullian spiritual family which regarded theology as the ultimate source of wisdom while rejecting philosophy as either useless or even hostile to Christian doctrine. It is in this sense that many regard *theologism* and *fideism* to be synonymous, but that kind of equation should be held with great caution as can be seen from the second and third general tendencies.

As a second general theologistic tendency, Gilson presented the Augustinian family which sought to blend philosophy within theology, but also saw faith as necessary for doing philosophy, as evinced by St. Augustine's maxim *nisi credideritis, non intelligetis*, and other related maxims. Such a necessity for faith prior to philosophical understanding is indeed a fideistic tendency, though, many doctrines within the Augustinian family can be isolated from their original context and shown to be philosophically rigorous and not to depend *in argument* upon faith in a revealed premise.

⁶³ Nevertheless, if they are Christian philosophers in an imperfect, *loose sense* of the term—which I contend they are still in principle in those very doctrines that do not violate Gilson's enunciated principles—we will have to examine what he views to be the *perfect sense* of Christian philosophy, which will come from the proper understanding of the relationship between Christianity and philosophy, and faith and reason. For this, I must wait for a future publication to address more adequately.

The second tendency, however, points to a third general theologistic tendency that Gilson finds to be present in one of the greatest examples of the Augustinian family, St. Anselm of Canturbury. This tendency he had described in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* to be where, “[i]nstead of attempting to kill it by discrediting the work of the philosophers, some divines have thought it better to tame and, so to speak, to domesticate philosophy by merging it in theology.”⁶⁴ In *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, Gilson showed St. Anselm to be guilty of this where he attempted to demonstrate mysteries of faith such as the Trinity and Incarnation. In such cases, the theologian has formally violated philosophy such that neither philosophy nor theology really remain, for he has attempted philosophical demonstrations either from premises containing properly revealed data or aimed at proving *articles of faith*. It is such a doctrine that drove Gilson to write,

They look like philosophy, they talk like philosophy, they sometimes are studied or taught in schools under the name of philosophy: yet, in point of fact, they are little more than theologies clothed in philosophical garb.⁶⁵

It is this form of theologism—philosophy formally merged into theology in such a way as to compromise both philosophical and theological method—where the formal conflation of philosophy and theology occurs, and which I maintain to be for Gilson *theologism proper*, while these other tendencies given are analogous forms of it.

A fourth theologistic tendency that Gilson mentions—which can be found in varying degrees in those adherents to the first three—is one in which the order of nature is denigrated in order to exalt the order of grace. While Gilson holds St. Bonaventure to be guilty of this theologistic tendency, he in no way accuses the Seraphic Doctor of the ex-

⁶⁴ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 36.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

treme view of this held by *sceptics* who thought that nature held no intelligibility and order. The end result for those who held this view in an extreme way was not only a return to the denial of any possibility for philosophy, but a complete scepticism about God and nature.

If, however, *theologism* was equally detrimental to the relationship of philosophy and theology, and reason and faith—as was *rationalism*—what then does Gilson regard to be the proper way to engage in both of these correlative pairs? Further treatment should be given by an examination of Gilson’s later works from the 1940s onward.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, even now armed with this knowledge of Gilson’s understanding of theologism, one has gained two important things: (a) a detailed explanation for how *Christian philosophy properly speaking* does not entail the formal conflation of philosophy with Christianity in general or with Christian theology specifically; (b) a hermeneutical tool for the better interpretation of Gilson’s later writings on Christian philosophy. Indeed, for where Gilson appears to argue for a “need” for revelation in order to attain certain objects of knowledge about God and about Being, but then proceeds to provide a philosophical grounding to that knowledge, given his doctrine on theologism such a “need” must be interpreted as referring to a *de facto extreme difficulty*, not a *de iure impossibility* for attaining such objects in an unaided manner. Otherwise, the philosophical grounding which often includes seeking to demonstrate such knowledge after revelation has helped attain it would be akin to attempting to demonstrate *articles of faith*, that is, *de iure*

⁶⁶ I have partially done so in my currently unpublished dissertation, “Étienne Gilson and the First Two Stages of His Christian Philosophy.” In this account, I treat of Gilson’s doctrine on Christian philosophy from its Gestational Stage in the 1920s up through its 2nd Stage ending in the late 1950s. I demarcate the 3rd Stage to include a series of works from the late 1950s to the end of his career, though this 3rd Stage was only touched in brief in my concluding chapter. Cf. James D. Capehart, “Étienne Gilson and the First Two Stages of His Christian Philosophy” (PhD diss., University of St. Thomas [Houston], 2018).

indemonstrable knowledge about God, and would therefore be a case of the theologism in a strict sense which he rejects so vehemently.

In short, I hope that this treatment of Gilson's notion of theologism serves as a launching point for a further discussion of two additional points regarding his Christian philosophy: What is the principle of unity within this Christian philosophical act that maintains a formal distinction between the philosophical and properly theological? What kinds of objects of knowledge does Gilson truly regard *de iure* to require the aid of Christian revelation to attain, and which does he regard *de facto* extremely difficult to attain prior to Christian revelation, but once attained, are susceptible of philosophical grounding, including demonstration? To these points let us return at a later date.



**Gilson's Notion of Theologism in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* and
*Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages***

SUMMARY

The author examines Gilson's development of the term "theologism" from his 1937 *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* and his 1938 *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*. This term is important for understanding Gilson's developing doctrine on Christian philosophy. The treatment of it helps to show how Gilson's understanding of Christian philosophy does not entail the formal conflation of philosophy with Christianity—as some have accused. In fact, the knowledge of what theologism is—referring primarily to the misuse of philosophy by the theologian—helps to set the stage for seeking an understanding of the proper relationship of Christianity to philosophy, a unity which maintains formal distinction. This knowledge also provides a hermeneutical tool for the proper interpretation of Gilson's later writings on Christian philosophy.

KEYWORDS

Gilson, Bonaventure, Anselm, theologism, Christian theology, Christian philosophy, Christianity, faith, reason.

REFERENCES

Capehart, James D. "Étienne Gilson and the First Two Stages of His Christian Philosophy." PhD diss., University of St. Thomas (Houston), 2018.

- Chesterton, G. K. "The Blue Cross." In *Father Brown: The Essential Tales*. New York: The Modern Library, 2005.
- Gilson, Étienne. *Christianisme et Philosophie*. Paris: Vrin, 1936 [*Christianity and Philosophy*, translated by Ralph MacDonald. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939].
- Gilson, Étienne. "La notion de philosophie chrétienne." *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* 31, no. 2 (1931): 37–85 ["The Notion of Christian Philosophy," translated by Gregory Sadler, 128–140. In *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation: The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates in France*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011].
- Gilson, Étienne. *Le Thomisme: Introduction à la Philosophie de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 5ed rev. et aug. Paris: J. Vrin, 1944 [*The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, translated by L. K. Shook. New York: Random House, 1956].
- Gilson, Étienne. *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*. New York: Scribner's, 1938.
- Gilson, Étienne. "Sens et nature de l'argument de saint Anselme." *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 9 (1934): 5–51.
- Gilson, Étienne. "The Meaning and Nature of St. Anselm's Argument," 38–79. In *Medieval Essays*, translated by James G. Colbert. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011.
- Gilson, Étienne. *The Philosopher and Theology*, translated by Cécile Gilson. New York: Random House, 1962.
- Gilson, Étienne. *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy: Gifford Lectures 1931-1932*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.
- Gilson, Étienne. *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937.
- Houser, R. E. "Bonaventure's Three-fold Way to God." *Philosophy* 6 (1997): 91–135.
- Sadler, Gregory B. "Saint Anselm's *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* as a Model for Christian Philosophy." *The Saint Anselm Journal* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 32–58.