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GILSON ON THE RATIONALITY OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

In Gilson's important book, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, he addresses a curious fact of history, one that was lost on me until I read Gilson.¹ While a standard interpretation of ancient Greek society would have us believe that the ancient Greeks cultivated philosophy as a crowning cultural achievement and that this achievement was embraced by the wider population of Greek civilization, the actual story of the relationship of philosophy to the rest of Greek culture is quite different. The truth is that the underlying skepticism in Greek society resisted accommodating philosophy as a part of Greece's cultural family.² Contrary to popular opinion, philosophy suffered a kind of cultural exile in ancient Greece. It was the Catholic Church, Gilson declares, that adopted Greek philosophy and gave it a happy home. This was a happy adoption because the Church recognized that Greek philosophy brought resources to assist in the promulgation of Christian wisdom.

The early Church Fathers realized that, if Greek philosophy could reinforce rather than conflict with Christian teachings, Christians could show to skeptical Hellenistic intellectuals that Christianity was reasonable. The Patristics readily understood that Greek philosophy could

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¹ Étienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), pp. 5-6.

² The “general skepticism that lies at the heart of ancient Greek culture” has been discussed effectively in this connection by Peter Redpath, *Wisdom's Odyssey: From Philosophy to Transcendental Sophistry* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Rodopi Editions, 1997), p. 28.

assist Christianity on three fronts: (1) by interpreting Scripture, which, after all, had been written in the Greek language; (2) by explicating articles of faith, and (3) by defending Christianity against those who said it was unreasonable. This last contribution of Greek wisdom—a Christian apologetic—was decisive for Christian philosophy in the Middle Ages. Out of it would grow an intellectual development culminating in the High Scholasticism of the thirteenth century, the epitome of which was the synthesis of philosophy and theology defining the work of St. Thomas Aquinas.

At this point, Gilson, being the consummate historian, might interrupt and remind us that, even during Patristic times, there were dissenting voices about the relationship of faith and reason. This reminder emanates out of Gilson's brief, but magnificent, volume, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*. In the first chapter of that book, Gilson discusses several early Christian writers who were so uncomfortable about the claim that Christian faith could marry Greek philosophy that they officially protested the marriage.

The Latin writer Tertullian (160-220) was arguably the most strident critic of the philosophers. In his book, *On Prescription Against Heretics*, he says that philosophy seduces a Christian into foolishness, defeating the edifying wisdom that comes from the Christian faith alone. This emphasis on faith, *fides* in Latin, gives the name *fideism* to Tertullian's position. Fideism asserts that knowledge can only come by faith, not reason. Gilson believes that Tertullian's expression of fideism is so decisive that he flatters him by using his name generically to label all subsequent fideists as members of "the Tertullian family." Gilson finds in a subsequent quotation Tertullian's expression of the fideist's *credo*. It is this *credo* that makes the Tertullian family a "house united":

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from the porch of Solomon (Acts 3:5) who had himself taught that the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart (Wisdom 1:1). Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic and dialectical composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the Gospel! With our

faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.³

Gilson cautions that the philosopher may not dismiss Tertullian's words with a wave of the hand. The philosopher must take the fideist's challenge seriously, for no less a reason than that the fideist claims his viewpoint has the support of Holy Scripture. Did not St. Paul warn:

Beware unless any man cheat you by philosophy, and vain deceit; according to the tradition of men... and not according to Christ. (Col. 2:8)

Do not St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:21-25 give the fideist the high ground?

God decided to save those who believe, by means of the "foolish" message we preach. Jews want miracles for proof and Greeks look for wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, a message that is offensive to the Jews and non-sense to the Greeks. But for those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, this message is Christ, who is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For what seems to be God's foolishness is wiser than men's wisdom, and what seems to be God's weakness is stronger than men's strength. (1 Cor. 1:21-25)

And yet, in spite of these remarks in First Corinthians, the story cannot be as simple as the fideist claims, because St. Paul balances these remarks elsewhere. Recall his unequivocal words in Romans 1:20:

Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen. So they have no excuse at all.

What are these remarks but a profession of the power of philosophy? St. Paul here implies that philosophers can do what they do: infer from the evidences of natural experience something about the supernatural existence and essence of God. Human reason is sufficient to tell us something about God, certainly not as a substitute for Revelation's communication of God as mysterious, but something significant about God nonetheless. Furthermore, we cannot forget (1) that St. Paul was philosophically trained, probably in Stoicism, and (2) that his philosophical training served him well on many occasions, especially as he

³ Id.

debated representatives of the different philosophical schools on Mars Hill and elsewhere (Acts 17:22-31). Moreover, was it not this same Paul who said about Jesus that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are concealed in him” (Col. 2:3)?⁴

So, Gilson insists, it all depends on how one interprets Scripture—how one finds a way to reconcile passages that may, upon a superficial reading, appear to conflict. St. Paul’s words do not condemn philosophy in principle, only its misuse is an excuse to undermine faith. Certainly, the good news for Christian philosophers is that Tertullian was a minority voice among the Patristics. In fact, ironically, later Church authorities judged Tertullian himself, in spite of the title of his book, a heretic!

At this point, I would like to take a step that even Gilson does not take, although in principle he would not oppose it. I think it is worthwhile to reinforce the conviction that reason can befriend faith. I wonder what St. Paul and the Patristics would answer if I posed to them the question: “Was Jesus a philosopher?” In other words, what would Jesus say about whether Athens can befriend Jerusalem?

I admit it strikes one as an odd question, “Was Jesus a philosopher?” Nonetheless, it is an important question, one that can illumine Gilson’s reasons for believing that there is kinship, rather than hostility, between Christianity and reason. I remember the first time I heard someone announce that “Jesus was the greatest philosopher.” It occurred during the campaign for the American presidency in the year 2000. The media, always anxious to insinuate that George Bush was not intelligent, asked him this question during a campaign debate with Al Gore: “Who is your favorite philosopher?” Without hesitation, Bush answered, “Jesus Christ.”⁵ Many people, including many professors in departments of philosophy throughout the land, thought Bush’s answer

⁴ Only a person trained in philosophy could enter into conversation about substantive topics on Mars Hill (= the *Areopagus*).

⁵ The media were convinced that George Bush was a dunce and always looked for an occasion to demonstrate it. Gore they anointed as intelligent, even though Bush’s academic record was far better than both Gore’s, and John Kerry’s, Bush’s opponent in 2004; about Obama’s academic records we cannot say; they are sealed, not to be released.

was silly. For a moment I may have been a little uncomfortable with his answer myself. However, I am now prepared to defend Bush's answer as correct and appropriate, even though it is not an answer one expects, even if one is trained in both philosophy and theology. But its unpredictability does not invalidate it as a good answer. Moreover, Gilson, I am convinced, would endorse President Bush's answer.

Still, it is a curiosity that few of us would name Jesus when asked the same question. Even a soul so devout as Dante announced that it was Aristotle, not Jesus, who was "the Master of all who know." For some reason we are reluctant to describe Jesus as intellectually skilled. I suspect that fideism has been influential in effecting this discomfort.

There is in our culture an uneasy relation between Jesus and intelligence, and I have actually heard Christians respond to my statement that Jesus is the most intelligent man who ever lived by saying that it is an oxymoron. Today we automatically position him away from the intellect and intellectual life. Almost no one would consider him to be a thinker...⁶

And yet this unwillingness to appreciate Jesus as an intellect cannot conform to what the Gospel teaches about Jesus. The logic is straightforward: If Jesus is not only fully and perfectly divine but also fully and perfectly human, Jesus must be the standard for any and every kind of human excellence. Contemplating Jesus behaving in a way to fulfill and demonstrate these excellences—like being an outstanding philosopher—may strike us odd but that is because the Gospel only presents Jesus as he is engaged in specific pursuits, relevant to his mission. However, even in the Gospel we know that his excellence is boundless, even though it is in many respects more evident implicitly than explicitly. For example, we do not observe Jesus making a busi-

⁶ Dallas Willard, "Jesus the Logician," *Christian Scholars Review* 28 (1999 No. 4): 605. I have relied heavily on this article in my discussion, even though I regard it with a certain ambivalence. It is clever and insightful, but it seems to mistake Jesus' philosophical thinking in the Gospels for mere logical thinking. Willard seems to assume, as do many modern scholars, that philosophy is merely logic, a mistake the discoverer of logic, Aristotle, warned subsequent philosophers about. Willard says Jesus is a logician in the sense that he pays keen attention to logical relations. But this is to diminish the significance of Jesus' thinking. He is not mainly interested in logical relations; he is interested in real relations, which is the stuff of philosophy. Jesus, then, is not merely a logician. He is a philosopher. In spite of this limitation, Willard's is an excellent essay.

ness transaction in exchange for his labor as a carpenter. But he must make that transaction in the best possible way. In addition, Jesus does not cast a net with his disciples, but surely he could do so in the most excellent way. He not only could fish but was in fact the consummate fisherman. He makes possible the greatest catch reported in the Gospels (John 21). And he certainly excelled as a “fisher of men” (Luke 5:4-12).

Because we do not see Jesus in a variety of everyday roles, it stretches our imagination that he would excel at them. But excel he must. We must resist prejudging that Jesus could not participate in and excel at unfamiliar roles simply because we do not encounter them in the Gospels. The Gospels themselves provide an object lesson against such prejudgment. The Pharisees could not imagine that a mere carpenter, whose friends numbered undistinguished fishermen and a tax collector, could be the Messiah—not to mention that he was kind and sociable with sinners at dinner.

Now when I say “Jesus was a philosopher,” I do not mean that he developed theories, demonstrations, and criticisms like the classical and mainstream philosophers that usually come to mind: thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, St. Thomas Aquinas; or if one’s taste in philosophy is more recent, thinkers like Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Heidegger. Certainly, Jesus was not a philosopher in this more conventional sense. Having said that, there is no doubt he could have excelled at conventional philosophy. What is more, had he done so, his philosophies, unlike the philosophies of those just mentioned, would be absolutely free of error! He could have excelled at this—philosophy—or at any other kind of intellectual activity.

He could have. Just as he could have handed Peter or John the formulas of Relativity Physics or the Plate Tectonic theory of the earth’s crust, etc. He certainly could, that is, if he is indeed the one Christians have traditionally taken him to be. But he did not do it, and for reasons which are bound to seem pretty obvious to anyone who stops to think about it.⁷

⁷ Id., p. 606.

Why he did not is a discussion for another day. I'm more interested now in indicating how when Jesus uses philosophical insights he advances his work as a teacher and public figure in the Gospels. Surely, philosophical skills are involved in this work. True, as I just said, Jesus is not a philosopher in an academic sense, but Jesus certainly was a capable philosopher. It is doubtful whether a twelve year old boy who could keep a college of rabbis and scribes at rapt attention while commenting on Scripture and fielding questions on Jewish theology could lack philosophical acumen (Luke 2:41-49).

To read the Gospel through the lens of fideism diminishes Jesus significantly. The fideist devalues the role of Jesus' intelligence in his own work and mission. When we reflect on Jesus' conduct and teachings, the fideist would have us doubt that Jesus knew what he was doing and could explain it philosophically. If we take the fideist's view to its logical conclusion, are we to doubt that Jesus was intellectually aware and competent? He restored sight to the blind and cured the lame. He walked on water and fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes. Are we to believe that he did not know what he was doing? Did he just rely on thoughtless incantations and petitions? Central to Jesus' mission is to teach moral and personal responsibility. Does that not suppose that he had genuine moral insight and understanding? Or are we to think that he just mindlessly spouted words that were channeled into him and through him? The fideist is asking us to believe something incredible.⁸

For other reasons, I think the Gospel makes it clear that Christianity aims to satisfy our intellect as well as our other needs. First, just by definition, it must work that way, because the Gospel, after all, is for the guidance and salvation of human persons. But what is it to be a human person? A person is a rational existent with free will. That is why the Gospel is significant: it fulfills revelation and salvation for rational existents with free will. But in some way or other, that must involve philosophy, because the wonder out of which philosophy is born contemplates what it is to be human. The philosophy of the hu-

⁸ This paragraph paraphrases Willard, p. 611.

man person is an exploration of the significance of our reason and our freedom.

Secondly, Jesus' use of parables attempts to bring to our attention important philosophical relationships. They are brilliant narrations relying on analogical reasoning, which Aristotle described as the hallmark of philosophical excellence. In fact, Jesus' parables aim to accomplish in a deeper way what Socrates' philosophical question-and-answer seeks: self-knowledge. Jesus employs parables for a similar purpose. His aim is not to use philosophy to win intellectual battles or to defeat someone in a debate. He wants his hearers to ponder philosophical relationships in a way that gives them deeper spiritual insight. Jesus also knows, like every good philosopher, that insight builds best on what one already knows. Accordingly, his parables rely on common or everyday experiences to provide the occasion for insight into the meaning of human life and our relationship with God. In this way, the parables become more of an invitation than a set teaching or lecture. Jesus

does not try to make everything so explicit that the conclusion is forced down the throat of the hearer. Rather, he presents matters in such a way that those who wish to know can find their way to, can come to, the appropriate conclusion as something *they* have discovered—whether or not it is something they particularly care for.⁹

Perhaps one of the reasons we may hesitate to think of Jesus as a philosopher is that people commonly associate philosophers with interminable disputations. They judge that philosophers are contentious to the point of making people uncomfortable. But one must remember that one person's discomfort may be another's defense of truth and spiritual insight. Jesus also knows that he must sometimes disagree. He challenges assumptions and he provides justification. Consider his reply to certain Sadducees when they challenge his belief in the resurrection (Luke 20:27-40). The Sadducee's confront Jesus with this situation which is supposed to show that the idea of the resurrection makes no sense:

⁹ Id., p. 607.

The law of Moses said that if a married man died without children, the next eldest brother should make the widow his wife, and any children they had would inherit in the line of the older brother. In the “thought experiment” of the Sadducees, the elder of seven sons died without children from his wife, the next eldest married her and also died without children from her, and the next eldest did the same, and so on through all seven brothers. Then the wife died (small wonder!). The presumed absurdity in the case was that in the resurrection she would be the wife of all of them, which was assumed to be an impossibility in the nature of marriage.¹⁰

Jesus replies that this argument does not show that the resurrection is absurd, because marriage, as we normally understand it, does not apply in heaven. In heaven we will not have mortal bodies; instead, we will have “glorified bodies”—bodies consisting of a non-physical nature, analogous to the bodies of angels.¹¹ The Sadducees fallaciously believe that the resurrection is merely a continuation of our bodies and biological life as it exists now. Thus, the Sadducee’s hypothetical case loses its effectiveness because it is irrelevant, Jesus argues, to suppose that the woman could have conjugal relations with all seven brothers. Since sexual relations and marriage relate to our mortal, but not our glorified, bodies, marital relations do not apply in heaven. So, Jesus here provides a lesson in the metaphysics of human nature—in its earthly form and in its heavenly form.

Notice that Jesus’ distinction between our mortal and our glorified bodies is a metaphysical distinction. When St. Thomas Aquinas makes such a metaphysical distinction in his writings we describe it as the work of a thinker doing philosophy. Why is it less philosophical, indeed less metaphysical, when Jesus makes the same distinction?—especially when one considers that St. Thomas first learned the distinction by studying Jesus’ words in the Gospels.

In light of these observations, the fideist interpretation that reason is hostile to the integrity of Christian faith and understanding is unconvincing. The fideists, the Tertullian family, as Gilson calls them, fail

¹⁰ *Id.*, p. 609.

¹¹ “Glorified body,” is my translation of St. Paul’s Greek expression, *sōma pneumatikon*, literally “spiritualized body,” in 1 Cor. 15: 44. I refer to it here to indicate further what Jesus might mean when comparing our bodies in heaven to the angels.

to understand that Jesus is a *thinker*, that this is not a dirty word but an essential work, and that his other attributes do not preclude thought, but only insure that he is certainly the greatest thinker of the human race: ‘the most intelligent person who ever lived on earth’.¹²

He constantly uses his talent of philosophical insight to enable people to search “inside their own heart and mind” to advance self-discovery. Surely this talent for philosophical reflection played a role in Jesus’ own growth in “wisdom,” mentioned in the Gospel of Luke (2:52).¹³

Several significant conclusions follow from this recognition of Jesus as a skilled philosopher in his own unique way and for his own purposes.

(1) Since philosophy in certain respects is implicit in Jesus’ work, the fideist view is unconvincing. (2) If philosophy is compatible with the Christian life, there is no reason to believe that a Christian should rule out philosophy as a vocation. A Christian might be called to devote his or her life to the science of philosophy as a handmaiden to Christian wisdom. (3) The example of Jesus encourages us to petition him for our intellectual needs just as we do for other demands. Appreciating that Jesus is a thinker “has important implications for how we today view Jesus’ relationship to our world and our life—especially if our work happens to be that of art, thought, research, or scholarship.”¹⁴ How could we personally relate Jesus to our intellectual, scientific, or artistic lives if he were philosophically indifferent or obtuse? Our discipleship with Jesus depends on seeing his relevance in everything we do, including—and perhaps especially—in our chosen fields of technical or professional expertise. How can we cultivate that discipleship if we “leave him at the door”? Appreciating that Jesus is an intellect and a kind of philosopher enables us to include him and recognize his relevance to our technical and professional lives, even if they are the lives of artists, philosophers, or scientists.¹⁵

¹² Willard, p. 610.

¹³ Id., p. 610.

¹⁴ Id., p. 605.

¹⁵ Id.

I am again reminded of the example of St. Thomas Aquinas. Surely, St. Thomas was not wasting his time when he prayed intensely and patiently for Jesus to empower and illumine his mind before he prepared his philosophical lectures and writings. This is an event worth pondering: the same Christian who might be reluctant to call Jesus a philosopher would never doubt the appropriateness of St. Thomas' prayers for Jesus' wisdom and intellectual support. If you asked St. Thomas what Jesus knew about philosophy, he would surely smile and reply laconically, "everything."

Conclusion

As I said earlier, I think Gilson would approve of my response to the question, "Was Jesus a philosopher?" Our Christian faith is not alien to reason. It involves rationality just as it seeks to integrate all of our faculties: our physical and emotional powers; our imagination and memory; our will and intellect. Jesus models this integration for us. Grace perfects nature, and our nature involves reason. "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). This is not to say that every Christian should be a philosopher in a professional sense. But it is to say that the philosophical life is compatible with the Christian life. Gilson would add that it also indicates a way in which philosophy can play a powerful role to serve Christian faith in the modern world. Philosophy's role is important when one considers it is not an age of faith anymore. For this reason the last two Popes—John Paul II and Benedict XVI—have called on philosophy to help transcend the relativism of the age and to help re-evangelize civilization. John Paul II explains that philosophy can serve faith in his opening remarks in the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (1998):

Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart the desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that by knowing and loving God, men and women can come to the fullness of the truth themselves.

Gilson would remind us that, in order to accomplish what John Paul II envisions, the Christian philosopher must engage the modern, pluralistic world. He or she cannot retreat from it. To make Christian philosophy a living endeavor, one must engage philosophies in the here-and-now.

[I]t is important to acknowledge that the philosophy of our time is the only living philosophy, the only actually existing philosophy by which we can communicate with the philosophy that is eternal. The treasure of philosophical learning accumulated by wise men of all ages has a real existence only in the thinkers of today, in the mind of each one of us, in the present time in which we all take part.¹⁶

This requires a determination to engage the modern world with the generous appreciation of the fact that, since God is truth, wherever there is truth there will be something congenial to God. John Paul II modeled this practice famously. The modern Christian philosopher must defend Christian wisdom while being antagonized by hostile philosophical schools. However, if God is truth, there is always a way to begin the conversation once one finds a common ground in truth. The modern Christian philosopher must be confident that that conversation can take place. With its anchor in truth, Christian wisdom is eminently defensible to those who will listen. Finding a way through Christian charity and restoration of Christian culture to secure that conversation and defense is the task Christians face in the modern, pluralistic world. When Christians do this, they follow the example of that Christian apologist of old, St. Paul himself:

We destroy false arguments; we pull down every proud obstacle that is raised against the knowledge of God; we take every thought captive and make it obey Christ. (2 Cor. 10:5)

If my observations are sound, there are good reasons to believe that Christianity is rational. The examples of the great Doctors of the Church, the Church Fathers, the Apostles, and Jesus himself indicate that Christian faith and reason are compatible. Gilson would say that there are lessons in this for the philosopher and the non-philosopher.

¹⁶ Étienne Gilson, *Three Quests in Philosophy* (Toronto, Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2008), ch. 1, "The Education of a Philosopher," p. 14.

By no means have I tried to argue that reason's support of faith implies that all Christians should be philosophers. On the other hand, I am consoled that my observations show that philosophy is a legitimate calling for a Christian and that philosophy can defend the Christian faith.

This defense is possible even if most Christians do not bother to become skillful at it. Most people acquire their faith from their upbringing and from the wider culture. But if what I have said is plausible, Christians do not expect each other to assent to Christian teachings as if they were groundless. Historically, at least in the tradition of the Catholic Church, the presumption prevails that while this particular Christian cannot marshal a defense of his or her faith, somebody can.

Moreover, it may surprise us how many Christians will step up to make that defense. This is because a defense of Christianity can range across a spectrum. At one end, there may be a Dante giving *fisici e metafisici argomenti* in his defense. At another frequency there may be a Christopher Dawson or Étienne Gilson giving historical evidence. At another place on the spectrum may appear a John of the Cross relying on direct religious experience. At another end of the spectrum may appear someone like my mother relying on the authority of her parents and her Church. This last is not to be dismissed lightly.

For of course authority, however we may value it in this or that particular instance, is a kind of evidence. All of our historical beliefs, most of our geographical beliefs, many of our beliefs about matters that concern us in daily life, are accepted on the authority of other human beings, whether we are Christians, Atheists, Scientists, or Men-in-the-Street.¹⁷

This is all to say that Christianity historically has been a religion that expects a defense if it is called for. This is an important point because, as John Paul II explains effectively in *Fides et Ratio*, it is this expectation that Christianity is rational that separates it in kind from mere superstition.

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, "On Obstinacy in Belief," in *They Asked for a Paper* (London: Geoffrey Bles, Ltd., 1962), pp. 183-196.

This can be shown by a homely example that my colleague Brendan Sweetman likes to tell. Imagine you are being solicited to join a fringe religious group called the “Abominable Snowman Worship Society.” Naturally, you would want to know on what grounds the members of the society believed in and worshipped the Abominable Snowman.

Now if nobody in the group was interested in this question, and the members of the group simply said they believed on faith and urged you to commit yourself to their faith too, promising that your life would be changed, spiritually renewed, happier, and so on, it is likely that you would not do it.¹⁸

You would be all the more reluctant if they asked you to pay a considerable amount of money to join. Clearly, such a religion differs in kind from Christianity, because, the members of the Abominable Snowman Society cannot defend their faith. In fact, nobody can. Hence, to be a member of such a group, one has to be indifferent to the whole question of evidence, unless the authority of such a small and eccentric membership alone counts as evidence. How different it is with Christian belief! True, a given individual may not be able to advance a defense, or may only be able to advance a minimal one. Many, if not most, Christians may be indifferent to defending their faith. But, in principle, a defense is possible and there are people professionally committed to spending their lives promulgating that defense.

Let Gilson have the last word. He would refer us to a principle that he highlights in his historical work as a Christian philosopher: the unity of truth. The reason Christianity is defensible is because it has its source in God, who is the Truth. As a result, whatever is true is in harmony with Christian truth. Since God is Truth, no truth can conflict with God. All truth, regardless of its origin, is “God friendly,” one might say. Therefore, truths discovered by our natural intelligence never conflict with God’s own supernatural understanding. Grace perfects, does not destroy, nature. Faith can marry, faith need not divorce,

¹⁸ Curtis L. Hancock and Brendan Sweetman, *Truth and Religious Belief* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1998), ch. 1, p. 8.

genuine reason. Sadly, so many marriages in the modern world are torn asunder. Our task as Christian thinkers is to nurture the marriage between Christian faith and philosophical reason and to keep the couple happy.

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GILSON ON THE RATIONALITY OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

SUMMARY

The underlying skepticism of ancient Greek culture made it unreceptive of philosophy. It was the Catholic Church that embraced philosophy. Still, Étienne Gilson reminds us in *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* that some early Christians rejected philosophy. Their rejection was based on fideism: the view that faith alone provides knowledge. Philosophy is unnecessary and dangerous, fideists argue, because (1) anything known by reason can be better known by faith, and (2) reason, on account of the sin of pride, seeks to replace faith. To support this twofold claim, fideists, like Tertullian and Tatian, quote St. Paul. However, a judicious interpretation of St. Paul's remarks show that he does not object to philosophy *per se* but to erroneous philosophy. This interpretation is reinforced by St. Paul's own background in philosophy and by his willingness to engage intellectuals critical of Christianity in the public square.

The challenge of fideism brings up the interesting question: what would Jesus himself say about the discipline of philosophy? Could it be that Jesus himself was a philosopher (as George Bush once declared)? As the fullness of wisdom and intelligence, Jesus certainly understood philosophy, although not in the conventional sense. But surely, interpreting his life through the lens of fideism is unconvincing. Instead, an appreciation of his innate philosophical skills serves better to understand important elements of his mission. His perfect grasp of how grace perfects nature includes a philosophy of the human person. This philosophy grounded in common-sense analysis of human experience enables Jesus to be a profound moral philosopher. Specifically, he is able to explain the principles of personal actualization. Relying on ordinary experience, where good philosophy must start, he narrates moral lessons—parables—that illumine difficulties regarding moral responsibility and virtue. These parables are accessible but profound, showing how moral understanding must transcend Pharisaical legalism. Additionally, Jesus' native philosophical power shows in his ability to explain away doctrinal confusions and to expose sophistical traps set by his enemies.

If fideism is unconvincing, and if the great examples of the Patristics, the Apostles, and Jesus himself show an affinity for philosophy, then it is necessary to conclude that Christianity is a rational religion. Accordingly, the history of Christian culture is arguably an adventure in faith and reason. Since God is truth and the author of all truths, there is nothing in reality that is incompatible with Christian teaching. As John Paul II explains effectively in the encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, Christianity is a religion

that is rational and can defend itself. This ability to marshal a defense makes Christianity a religion for all seasons.

KEYWORDS: philosophy, fideism, faith and reason, parables, moral understanding, grace and nature, metaphysical distinction, evidence, authority.