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GILSON ON DOGMATISM

In the 1936 William James Lectures at Harvard University, Étienne Gilson cautioned against philosophical mistakes among which a prominent place is occupied by dogmatism. In this article I am going to analyze Gilson’s exposition of the pre-Thomistic dogmatic “isms” and the post-Thomistic dogmatic “isms,” as discussed in his *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*,¹ in order to uncover reasons why philosophy may become conducive to dogmatism. Such a task seems to be up-to-date, as dogmatism is not only a historical problem left behind by past generations, but also an actual issue explicitly addressed by contemporary scholars.²

Pre-Thomistic Dogmatism

Abelard’s Logicism

Dogmatism preceding the times of St. Thomas Aquinas can be exemplified by the logical dogmatism of the scholastic age. According to Gilson, it consists in giving precedence to logical answers in re-

¹ See Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937).

² For example, see Madhuri M. Yadlapati, *Against Dogmatism: Dwelling in Faith and Doubt* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Vassilis Saroglou, “Beyond Dogmatism: The Need for Closure as Related to Religion,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 5:2 (2002): 183–194; Wentzel van Huyssteen, “Beyond Dogmatism: Rationality in Theology and Science,” *HTS Teologiese Studies* 44:4 (1988): 847–863.

sponding to philosophical (metaphysical) questions. Focusing on Peter Abelard's³ conceptual nominalism, Gilson identifies that the dogmatism of the scholastic age could have been avoided if as much energy as spent on providing good answers was also spent on understanding what kind of questions were being considered:

If you ask logic to answer a philosophical question, you can expect but a logical answer, not a philosophical one, with the unavoidable consequence that your question will appear as unanswerable, and as a pseudo-question. This was precisely the kind of mistake that Abailard would make. A forward, and sometimes a presumptuous man, he never had forewarnings while he was crossing some danger line . . . The upshot of Abailard's experiments is that philosophy cannot be obtained from pure logic . . . So experience taught me a manifest conclusion, that, while logic furthers other studies, it is by itself lifeless and barren, nor can it cause the mind to yield the fruit of philosophy, except the same conceive from some other source . . . If, as I hope, we succeed in finding a number of similar cases, all of them pointing to the same conclusion, we shall perhaps be justified in turning them into a single concrete experience of what philosophy actually is, and in ascribing to it an objective unity.⁴

Apart from logicism (of Abelard), Gilson indeed found a "number of similar cases" and he also identified them variously as "theologism," "mathematicism" (of Descartes), "physicism" (of Kant), "psychologism" (of Ockham), etc. All of these dogmatisms share a common characteristic, as they represent a kind of "rational ailment" that besieged medieval philosophy as early as in the eleventh century and eventually led to the breakdown of scholasticism in the twilight of the fifteenth century.

³ It should be noted, however, that Gilson takes up Abelard's experiments as an example of a "pre-Thomistic" attempts to solve the problem of universals (see id., 4–30). His intention is to highlight St. Thomas Aquinas as a shining example of *perennis philosophia* in the Medieval Ages.

⁴ Id., 11–12, 29–30.

With regard to “logicism,” Gilson was rightly convinced that such thinkers as Pierre Abelard (1072–1142), Roscellinus of Compiene (1050–1125, Abelard’s teacher), William of Champeaux (1070–1121, Abelard’s teacher), Berenger of Tours (999–1088) and a great majority of late eleventh and early twelfth century thinkers were trained as logicians rather than as philosophers. “Hence their natural tendency to deal in a purely logical way with all possible questions.”⁵ This intoxication with logic was at the root of the intractability of the logically satisfying but philosophically deficient answers they proffered to the philosophical problems they had confronted. Peter Abelard earned for himself the reputation of an honest traveler who failed to reach his destination but remained on the high way of truth (wisdom) incapacitated, however, with the wrong map. As a shining example of the efforts of that age, Gilson describes him in the following words:

Here is one of the brightest intellects the Middle Ages has ever produced; he begins by interpreting logic in terms of grammar; then he proceeds to interpret philosophy in terms of logic, and he fails to find a positive answer to his question, we see him ultimately reduced to a psychological solution. But was it a solution? . . . The difficulty was so real that Abailard himself felt it, but even his last allusion to an order of divine ideas is less an answer than a casual remark suggested to him by a short text in Priscian’s Grammar . . . Had Abailard been in a position to understand the import of that problem [of universals] and to realize its specific nature, he would at last have discussed a philosophical problem in a philosophical way . . . In point of fact, there is hardly a single one among the great logicians of that time who has not been accused of heresy . . . Yet Abailard himself was a moderate in those matters . . . It is a pity that goodwill plus logic can no more make a theologian than a philosopher.⁶

⁵ Id., 31.

⁶ Id., 28–32.

During his General Audience at St Peter's Square on November 4th, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI threw more light on the strength and weakness of Abelard's logicism in theology. Contrasting Abelard's theology with the theology of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, he described the latter as a "theology of the heart" (i.e., borne of the architectural principles of Revelation) and the former as a "theology of reason" (i.e., borne of the principles of interpretation from philosophy), and alluded that in the context of the traditional definition of theology originating from St. Anselm's *Proslogion*, "fides quarens intellectum (faith seeks understanding)," St Bernard, representing *monastic* theology, puts the accent on the first part of the definition, namely on *fides* (faith), whereas Abelard, who represents *scholastic* theology, "insists on the second part, that is on the *intellectus*, on understanding through reason."⁷

Dogmatic Theologism

Theologians of Abelard's epoch already knew what dangers excessive and arbitrary logicism had posed and they actually made some frantic efforts to meet the challenges of the time. The "monastic theology" of St Bernard as Pope Benedict hinted is only one of the many instances of the "history of that long struggle which went on between logicians and theologians for more than a century."⁸ Theology, at the time, was struggling to remain a separate discipline but when philosophy rapidly got involved in another subsequent arbitrary mix of logic and theology, it did not take long for theology to experience the same fate which philosophy underwent in the "court of logicians." The setting was already laid out ahead of time, when popular opinion started to have problem with distinguishing between philosophy and logic:

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Two Theological Models in Comparison: Bernard and Abelard*, General Audience on Nov 4th, 2009, at St. Peter's Square, Rome.

⁸ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 32.

Unaware of any dividing line between logic and philosophy, any twelfth-century professor of logic, who had never learned or taught anything but grammar and logic, would naturally call himself a philosopher. The theologians saw no reasons to worry about the mistakes made by the logicians. If there were such reasons, they utterly failed to perceive them. The only thing they 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 convinced that philosophy is nothing but logic applied to philosophical questions . . . 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 to this had to be removed, be it philosophy itself. But what was the best way for theology to get rid of philosophy was a rather intricate question.⁹

The response of medieval theologians to the perceived “danger” of philosophy was two-fold: the first experiment was to destroy philosophy and the second experiment was to tame or domesticate philosophy. Gilson does not consider either of the two experiments to be appropriate, as both presume the reduction of philosophy to theology (i.e., theologism), as was suggested by one of the best balanced treatises of that period, the treatise by St. Bonaventure entitled *On Reducing the Arts to Theology*.¹⁰ These two approaches are neither original to medieval theologians nor peculiar to Christian theologians. Historically, both approaches were already experimented upon by Tertulian and Origen in the second and the third century.

Moreover, in the medieval times, both Christian and Islamic theologians shared the same suspicion about the intrusion of philosophy into theological issues. A thematic consideration of the “neo-

⁹ Id., 32–33. It is noteworthy that grammar, logic and rhetoric constituted the medieval *trivium*, i.e., the lower division of the seven liberal arts, which formed the foundation for the *quadrivium*, the upper division of the medieval education in the liberal arts consisting of arithmetic (number), geometry (number in space), music (number in time), and astronomy (number in space and time).

¹⁰ Id., 49.

Tertulianism”¹¹ and “neo-Origenism”¹² of the medieval theologians (Christian Neoplatonism as well as Islamic Aristotelianism) serves a good background to William Ockham’s “post-Thomistic” theologism.

a) Christian Scholastic “Neo-Tertulianism” versus “Neo-Origenism.” It can be noted that as early as in the second century, when such names as Quintus Septimus Florens Tertulianus (155–240) and Origen Adamantus (184–254) were prominent, both suspicions and affirmations concerning the “marriage” of Greek philosophy and Christian theology had pitched religious thinkers into two camps. Tertulian was noted to have insisted in his *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* (*Prescriptions against Heretics*) that philosophy as “pop-paganism” is a work of demons, hence “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Or the Academy with the Church?”¹³

On the other side of the debate on the value of philosophy for theological discourse, we find Origen Adamantus, Tertulian’s contemporary, who maintained the intrinsic value of philosophical principles for theological discourse in his *De principiis* (*On First Principles*). He went as far as to employ scholarly philosophical tools in his exegetical work *Hexapla* (*Sixfold*). Origen’s *On First Principles* continued to be a widely studied philosophical treatise up until the time of the fourth century neo-Platonic theological school of Alexandria which was

¹¹ I use the expression “neo-Tertulianism” in a metaphoric sense to refer to the attitude of Christian and Islamic theologians who did not consider purely philosophical reasoning as a valid source of truth which can be useful in explaining the rational aspects of religious faith.

¹² I also use this expression “neo-Origenism” in contrast to “neo-Tertulianism” to metaphorically refer to the attitude of both Christian and Islamic thinkers who were convinced of the value of philosophical reasoning in explaining the rational aspects of religious faith.

¹³ In the chronological ordering of Tertulian’s works, John Kaye, Bishop of Lincoln, indicates that *De Praescriptione* was among Tertulian’s “pre-montanist” opuses. Cf. J. Kaye, *The Ecclesiastical History of the Second and Third Centuries* (1845, 3rd edition), <http://tertullian.org/articles/kaye/index.htm>, accessed on Feb 9th, 2016.

commonly paired with the neo-Aristotelian theological school of Antioch.¹⁴

Some eight hundred years after Tertulian and Origen, when logicism in the garb of philosophy threatened the fundamental assumptions of theology, a repeat of the brawl between faith and reason resurfaced. Gilson reports: “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.”¹⁵ This, however, is an attitude similar to that of Tertulian.

In the Medieval Ages, there are not only Christian theologians, but also Islamic theologians, and thus what philosophy is exposed to is not just a Christian theological onslaught, but a combination of a broader religious attack, so to speak. But just as there were Tertulians, so there also were Origenes of that time. Thus,

¹⁴ As a theologian, Origen articulated one of the earliest philosophical expositions of the Christian doctrine in his *De principiis*. It is important to underscore here as well that the philosophical tradition of Origen in Alexandria was overtly a Platonic tradition which was taken over by the subsequent Alexandrian school of theology, two centuries after him influencing both directly and remotely such Christian Platonic scholars as Arius (256–336), Athanasius (296–373), Augustine of Hippo (354–430). This Platonic tradition held sway up till the time of Yuhanna Ibn Haylan, the Christian philosopher who by the year 820 had gone to Baghdad and later became a teacher of the first Islamic scholar in Greek philosophy named Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad Farabi, or simply Al Farabi (872–950). See “Yuhanna Ibn Haylan,” in *Tahoor Encyclopedia*, <http://www.tahoor.com/en/Article/View/117917>, accessed on Feb 9th, 2016. The Aristotelianism of Al Farabi is, however, thanks to the simultaneous influence that traced back to the rival Christian Antiochean school of theology which espoused Aristotelianism in contrast to the Alexandrian Platonism. Al Farabi (872–950) transmitted Aristotelianism to Islamic philosophers such as Avicenna (980–1037), Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), Averroes (1126–1198) and the Jewish Muslim Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). At the turn of the eleventh century, it can loosely be said that most Christian theologians were Neo-Platonists under the influence of Plotinus, Porphyry and Boethius, whereas most Islamic theologians were Neo-Aristotelians or Peripatetics, thanks to Arabic translations of Al Farabi. From Al Farabi’s translations of Aristotle’s works other translations were made into Latin, which simultaneously granted Christian theologians ample access to Aristotle.

¹⁵ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 33.

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.¹⁶

b) The Islamic *Mutakallemim* (i.e., Muslim theologians): Islamic “neo-Tertulianism” versus Islamic “neo-Origenism.” Granted that Islamic scholars of the Medieval Age were mostly Aristotelians rather than Platonists, our reference to “Islamic neo-Origenism” here, is only a metaphor referring to those who experimented with the project of domesticating Aristotelianism into Islamic theology. In the same metaphorical sense, our use of “Islamic neo-Tertulianism” connotes those Islamic theologians who experimented with the project of destroying philosophy in order to build Islamic theology on the ruins of philosophy. Gilson reports the religious zeal of these opposing Islamic theological camps as follows:

Since, according to tradition, the Prophet had said: “The first thing which God created was knowledge or Reason,” some Mohammedan theologians concluded that speculation was one of the duties of believers . . . To other Mohammedan theologians, on the contrary, “whatever went beyond the regular ethical teaching was heresy . . . for faith should be obedience, and not . . . knowledge.”¹⁷

Thus, in the Medieval Ages, as it was among Christian theologians, so also was it among Islamic theologians that neo-Tertulianism and neo-Origenism co-existed and both camps proffered conscientiously contradictory arguments in defense of theology against the excesses of philosophy. While Al-Ashari represented neo-Tertullianism, Al-Ghazali was a good example of neo-Origenism.

¹⁶ Id.

¹⁷ Id., 33–34.

Decades before Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), dialectics had been introduced into Islamic theology by Al-Farabi¹⁸ and Avicenna.¹⁹ Expectedly, it met a violent reaction within Islamic religious circles. The suspicion of the danger of philosophy was expressed in Al-Ghazali's famous work, *Destruction of the Philosophers* (1090), where "against Aristotelianism, as it had been taught by Alfarabi and Avicenna, Gazali was able to turn Aristotle's own weapons in a masterly way."²⁰

Anti-Aristotelianism, however, was not unique to Islamic theology, for even Al-Ghazali borrowed from a Christian commentator of

¹⁸ Al-Farabi was trained as an Aristotelian logician and so he discussed such Aristotelian-inspired topics as the future of contingents, the number and relation of categories, the relation between logic and grammar. But also he is credited for other non-Aristotelian forms of inference as well as the categorization of logic into two separate groups, the first being "idea" and the second being "proof." He is also considered to have dealt with the theories of conditional syllogism and analogical influence which were part of the Stoic tradition of logic rather than Aristotelian. He introduced the concept of poetic syllogism in his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*. Cf. Seymour Feldman, "Rescher on Arabic Logic," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964): 726; A.A. Long, D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol. 1, Translations of the Principal Source with Philosophical Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); T. Ludescher, "The Islamic Roots of the Poetic Syllogism," *College Literature* 23:1 (1996): 93–99.

¹⁹ Avicenna wrote extensively in Arabic on logic, ethics and metaphysics. Some of his works were translated into Latin. In his works (*History of Islamic Philosophy* (Routledge, 2014), 174, and *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (Princeton, 2014), 103), Henry Corbin claims that Latin Avicennism had paralleled Latin Averroism until it was suppressed by the Parisian decrees of 1210 and 1215. Avicenna's psychology and epistemology had influenced Albertus Magnus, whereas his metaphysical insights on essence (Mahiat) and existence (Wujud) influenced Thomas Aquinas. The "Avicenna and Essentialism" by Nader El-Bizri (*Review of Metaphysics* 54 (2001): 753–778) and *Kitab al-shifa'*, *Metaphysics II* by Avicenna (ed. G. Anawati et al., Cairo 1975, 36) support a claim that Avicenna elucidated the essence-attribute questions in terms of ontological analysis of the modalities of being, namely impossibility, contingency and necessity. As a devout Muslim, he sought to reconcile rational philosophy with Islamic theology. After his death, Avicennism split into three different schools: al-Tusi (application of philosophy to the interpretation of political events and scientific advances), al-Razi (separation of the theology from philosophical concerns), and al-Ghazali (selective use of philosophy to support spiritual mysticism). Naturally, al-Razi had the greatest support of Islamic religious leadership of the time.

²⁰ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 34.

Aristotle, Johannes Philoponus.²¹ Notably, there were costly prices to pay for that religious zeal striving to dismantle philosophy in order to build a theological edifice:

Using reason against reason in behalf of religion is by itself a legitimate, and eventually a noble attitude; yet, if we adopt it, we must be ready to face its necessary consequences. In the first place, when religion tries to establish itself on the ruins of philosophy, there usually arises a philosopher to found philosophy on the ruins of religion. After a Gazali, there often comes an Averroes, who answers the *Destruction of the Philosophers* by a *Destruction of the Destruction*, as was the case with the famous book published by Averroes under that title; such apologies of philosophy, suggested . . . by theological opposition, are usually destructive of religion. In the second place, philosophy has as little to gain by such conflicts as has religion itself, for the easiest way for theologians to hold their ground is to show that philosophy is unable to reach rationally valid conclusions on any question related to the nature of man and his destiny . . . We gain nothing by destroying one in order to save another, for they stand and fall together. True mysticism is never found without some theology, and sound theology always seeks the support of some philosophy; but a philosophy that does not at least make room for theology is a short-sighted philosophy.²²

It is obvious that Al-Gazali's project of destroying philosophy in order to save religion missed its target, and even backfired against the very foundations of religious commitments. Notably, a century before Al-Gazali, an alternative approach which was to "befriend" (domesticate) philosophy was experimented by Al-Ashari (873–935).

If Al-Ghazali is considered to be an Islamic "neo-Tertulian," then Al-Ashari is to be an Islamic "neo-Origen." Gilson cites Prof. T. J. de Boer who describes Al-Ashari as "a man who understood how to render to God the things that are God's and to man the things that are

²¹ Id.

²² Id., 34–36.

man's."²³ Certainly, such lofty intentions are not lacking in all religious scholars who toe the path of Origen, but it can be easily attested by history that more often than not it turns out to be a tension of any servant of two Masters who in an attempt to please both ends up pleasing neither. The best such a servant can afford is to “rob Peter to pay Paul,” in which case more often than not deference is disproportionately tilted towards the greater of the two Masters. The most apt example which Gilson employs to illustrate this tension of the servant of two Masters is that of the religious admonition to philosophers on the considerations regarding “grace and freewill” by St. Bonaventure:

However much you ascribe to the grace of God, you will not harm piety by so doing, even though, by ascribing to the grace of God as much as you can, you may eventually wrong the natural powers and the free will of man. If, on the contrary, you wrong grace by crediting nature with what belongs to grace, there is danger . . . Consequently that position which . . . ascribes more to the grace of God and, because it establishes us in a state of more complete indigence, better harmonizes with piety and humility, is for that very reason safer than the other one . . . Even though that position were false, it would not harm piety or humility; it is therefore fitting and safe to hold it.²⁴

It is thus obvious that the eulogy of a “man who understands how to render to God the things that are God’s and to man the things that are man’s” is not as innocuous as Prof. de Boer assumes. However, it is better to assess Al-Ashari through the lens of Maimonides, a neutral (i.e., neither Christian nor Muslim) Jewish scholar, than through the categories of Bonaventure (i.e., the Christian categories of the Bible).

²³ T.J. de Boer, *History of Philosophy in Islam*, 56 (cited after id., 38–39).

²⁴ Étienne Gilson, *La Philosophie de Saint Bonaventure* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1926), 456–457 (cited after id., 51–52).

Gilson alludes to some of propositions common to all Muslim theologians of the time as reported by Moses Maimonides:²⁵

- All things are composed of atoms.
- There is a vacuum.
- Time is composed of time-atoms.
- Both positive and negative properties have a real existence, and are accidents which owe their existence to some *causa efficiens*.
- All existing things, i.e., all creatures, consist of substance and of accidents, and the physical form of a thing is likewise an accident.
- The test for the possibility of an imagined object does not consist in its conformity with the existing laws of nature, according to the Mutakallemim.

Taking just the first three of the above propositions, one can agree with Maimonides that

even these men themselves were aware of the fact . . . 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 . . . Even though its existence be convincingly established, that which actually is, proves nothing at all because it is merely one of the various phases of things, the opposite of which is equally admissible to our minds.²⁶

As Maimonides concluded, “these men were doing the very reverse of what Themistius rightly invites us to do, which is to adapt our opinions to things, instead of adapting things to our opinions; for this indeed cannot be done and it is a waste of time to try it.”²⁷

²⁵ Cf. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide to the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (as found in id., 39).

²⁶ Cf. Maimonides, *The Guide to the Perplexed* (cited after id., 41–42).

²⁷ Id., 41.

Gilson went on to draw the consequences out of such mind-dependent ontologies of the Islamic theologians:

The first proposition was that all things are composed of atoms . . . In order to account for the possibility of motion, these theologians admitted that there is a vacuum [second proposition] . . . wherein the atoms may combine, separate and move . . . Now, God is constantly creating anew a certain number of atoms which are separated from each other by empty space, [thus] their existence is as discontinuous in time as it is in space. In other words, time is composed of time-atoms [third proposition], each time-element being as indivisible in itself as are the atoms themselves. The consequence . . . just as space is made up of elements that are deprived of extension, so time is made up of elements that are deprived of duration . . . If longer times are not made up of shorter times, if time elements do not last, the obvious implication is that motion itself has nothing to do with duration.²⁸

It is obvious that such a “distortion of nature” cannot be upheld for too long without “the protest of nature itself asking justice from philosophy.”²⁹ Little wonder then, the Asharites did not travel long on the highway of religious zeal before they met with a philosophical gridlock just as the Ghazalites did. One cannot but feel their futile struggles to grapple with the consequences of their propositions. An insight from Maimonides is apt to describe their Waterloo:

In accordance with this principle [i.e., that time is composed of time-atoms] they assert that when man is perceived to move a pen, it is not he who has really moved it; the motion produced in the pen is an accident which God has created in the moving hand; but the creative act of God is performed in such a manner that the motion of the hand and the motion of the pen follow each other closely; but the hand does not act and is not the cause of the pen’s motion; for, as they say, an accident cannot pass from one

²⁸ Id., 42–43.

²⁹ Id., 45.

thing to another [further propositions] . . . There does not exist anything to which an action could be ascribed; the real *agens* is God . . . In short, most of the Mutakallemin believe that it must never be said that one thing is the cause of another; some of them who assumed causality were blamed for doing so.³⁰

It is significant to note that the above experiments of the Asharites in the ninth century, intended to domesticate philosophy to serve the cause of theology, were not peculiar to the Islamic scholars, as their refurbished version resurfaced in Malebranche's "occasionalism."

Gilson also cites another example of such experiments by a puritan theologian, Cotton Mather, who wrote that

The body, which is matter in such and such a figure, cannot affect the immaterial soul, nor can the soul, which has no figure, command the body; but the great God, having established certain laws, that upon such and such desires of the soul, the body shall be so and so commanded, *He* 'tis, who by his continual influx does execute His own laws; 'tis to his continual influx that the effects are owing.³¹

Therefore it is not a coincidence that the same mistake can be found across theologians of different creeds—Muslim (Asharites), Catholic (Nicholas Malebranche), and Protestant (Cotton Mather),

each of whom would have sternly consigned the other two to hell, yet who could not but agree on the same philosophy, precisely because theirs was a philosophy of theologians. With a little less zeal for the glory of God . . . these men would no doubt have realized that the destruction of causality ultimately meant the destruction of nature, and thereby of science as well as of philosophy.³²

³⁰ Id., 46.

³¹ Id., 47.

³² Id., 47–48.

Post-Thomistic Dogmatism

Ockham's Psychologism

Few decades after the death of Thomas Aquinas (i.e., in fourteenth century), a new trend of psychological response to what was wrongly considered as the “dangers of philosophy” emerged. William of Ockham is an example of this “post-Thomistic” psychologism. Already two centuries before him (i.e., in twelfth century), the distinction between philosophy and logic was completely blurred by the logicism of Peter Abelard. By virtue of being a Franciscan, William of Ockham (1285–1347) inherited the philosophical legacy of Franciscan scholasticism³³ as transmitted from Bonaventure, Anselm, and Duns Scotus.

The Franciscans were noted for their Platonic-Augustinian leanings in contrast to the Aristotelian leanings of the Dominicans. One could really expect that Ockham would not reach the same conclusions as Thomas Aquinas. Such an expectation, however, would be mistaken, since Ockham, “like St. Thomas Aquinas and Averroes, considered himself indebted to Aristotle for the principles of his philosophy.”³⁴ It is not therefore his philosophical background that led him to theologism, as in the case of the Islamic scholars.

Nevertheless, “if Ockham was an Aristotelian, and St. Thomas Aquinas an Aristotelian, and perhaps even Aristotle an Aristotelian, this at least remains to be explained: how is it that Ockham’s ultimate conclusions are so completely destructive of those of Aristotle as well as

³³ For an overview of the prolific output from this period of scholasticism, see *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1956). The book attests that the scholastics held sway in European universities for about six centuries (1100–1700), but around the 13th century, it is commonplace to speak of two schools of scholasticism, namely that of the Platonic-Augustinian Franciscans (Bonaventure, Anselm, Duns Scotus, Peter Auriol, Matthew of Aquasparta, Roger Marston, William of Ockham) and that of the Aristotelian Dominicans (Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas).

³⁴ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 63.

those of St. Thomas Aquinas?”³⁵ Gilson’s response to this *aporia* is tailored towards the religious zeal of William, zeal which drove him to theologism:

Ockham gives great weight to the first article of the Christian creed: I believe in God Almighty. Since it is an article of faith, it is needless to say that it cannot be proved. Yet, not only did Ockham use it as a principle in theology, which was a very proper thing to do, but he also resorted to it in discussing various philosophical problems, as if any theological dogma, held by faith alone, could become the source of philosophical and purely rational conclusions . . . [Unfortunately], if we allow pious feelings to decree what nature should be, we are bound to wrong nature . . . In theology, as in any other science, the main question is not to be pious, but to be right. For there is nothing pious in being wrong about God!³⁶

It is already evident from the above description, what sort of philosophical conclusions Ockhamism would entail. It is remarkable that “on precisely the same problem that had puzzled Abailard: what is the object of abstract knowledge; what are the so-called universals?”³⁷ Gilson assesses Ockham’s experiments with theologism. A singular example of an earlier attempt by his immediate predecessors on this same problem of universal is illustrative of Ockham’s project. The example of Henry of Harclay serves this purpose.

Harclay criticized Duns Scotus and Avicenna and an elaborate position similar to that of William of Champeaux’s *concept-realism*, according to which each concept represents an essence, each essence has an entity and unity of its own and is equally shared in by all the individuals of a certain class. Instead, Harclay leaned towards Peter Abelard and insisted on a *nominalistic* notion of universals such that the general idea of animal, for instance, either is nothing or is a mere defi-

³⁵ Id., 64.

³⁶ Id., 52.

³⁷ Id.

inition by the intellect of particular things that really exist outside the intellect. Thus, “every positive thing outside the soul is, as such, something singular.”³⁸

For Ockham, Harclay conceived of universals as images, pictures, or representations with which something similar corresponds in the nature of things, i.e., with some, *fundamentum in re*, hence for him, Harclay was not a *nominalist* but certainly a *realist*. Thus, in his characteristic “sharp-razor-mode” (Ockham’s razor), he argued that since everything that really exists is purely individual (Aristotelianism), our general ideas cannot correspond to anything in reality (anti-Aristotelianism). Hence, it is not universals’ nature to be either images, or pictures, or mental presentations of any real or conceivable things.

The comparison of Ockham’s position with Harclay’s position on the universals presents in clear terms that the difficulty raised by Ockham’s “pure position” is quite discomfoting. Gilson succinctly describes this difficulty by making the following distinction between concepts and pure ideas:

Every time philosophical speculation has succeeded in circumscribing what we might perhaps call a “pure position,” its discovery has regularly been attended by a philosophical revolution. Begotten in us by things themselves, concepts are born reformers that never lose touch with reality. Pure ideas, on the other hand, are born within the mind and from the mind, not as intellectual expressions of what is, but as models, or patterns, of what ought to be; hence they are born revolutionists. And this is the reason why Aristotle and Aristotelians write books on politics, whereas Plato and Platonists always write Utopias.³⁹

Though Ockham considered himself an Aristotelian, it is obvious that the “yoke of Plato” never left him. William of Ockham was a classic example to show that “the propensity to see nothing in philosophy

³⁸ J. Kraus, “Die Universalienlehre des Oxforder Kanzlers Heinrich von Harclay,” in *Divus Thomas XI* (1933): 290 (cited after id., 65).

³⁹ Id., 68.

but a particular department of theology was no less common among Christian theologians than among the Muslim interpreters of the Koran.”⁴⁰

After the Medieval Ages, “utopic” trails found patronage in some modern thinkers who were themselves trained as students of the scholastic Aristotelians (*substance* philosophers); for instance, René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, whose “clear and distinct ideas” and “formal apriorism of transcendental categories” respectively became seeds of philosophical revolutions, each of which kept pure reason “out of touch” with reality.

The vicious wheel of dogmatic deadlocks, which besieged medieval philosophy culminating in the breakdown of scholasticism, afflicted modern philosophy such that up until the twentieth century—when analytic philosophy proclaimed its manifesto of “logical atomism”—its attitude towards metaphysics was quite “unfriendly.” The pattern is repeated in the same cycle:

A certain man adopts a certain attitude in philosophy, and he follows it consistently, until he finds himself face to face with unwelcome consequences. He does his best to dodge them, but his own disciples, beginning as they do just where the master stopped, have less scruples than he about letting his principles publicly confess their necessary consequences. Everybody then realizes that the only way to get rid of those consequences is to shift the philosophical position from which they spring. Then the school dies; but it is not unlikely that one or two centuries later, in some university whence history has been banished as harmful to philosophical originality, some young man, still blessed with his native ignorance, will rediscover a similar position. As he will live and write in another time, he will say very old things in a new way . . . The trouble is that when philosophers fail, their

⁴⁰ Id., 49.

disheartened supporters never blame their master; they blame it on philosophy itself.⁴¹

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to uncover reasons why philosophy may become conducive to dogmatism which inevitably leads to the failure of philosophy. In the light of Gilson's considerations contained in his *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, it can be stated that philosophy is always exposed to the influence of dogmatism when it is done from a non-philosophical standpoint. For each time when the engagement in the philosophical enterprise is driven by non-philosophical needs, it is usually the case that the goal of philosophy is misconstrued as merely that of providing an instrumental ontology to non-philosophical areas of knowledge. To avoid such mistakes as logicism, theologism or psychologism, philosophy must recover its proper object that is the real world of persons and things, and its proper method that is metaphysics.

GILSON ON DOGMATISM

SUMMARY

The article aims at uncovering reasons why philosophy may become conducive to dogmatism which inevitably leads to the failure of philosophy. In the light of Gilson's considerations contained in his *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, the author concludes that philosophy is always exposed to the influence of dogmatism when it is done from a non-philosophical standpoint. For each time when the engagement in the philosophical enterprise is driven by non-philosophical needs, it is usually the case that the goal of philosophy is misconstrued as merely that of providing an instrumental ontology to non-philosophical areas of knowledge. To avoid such mistakes as logicism, theologism or psychologism, philosophy must recover its proper object that is the real world of persons and things, and its proper method that is metaphysics.

⁴¹ Id., 59.

KEYWORDS: philosophy, dogmatism, skepticism, scholasticism, Étienne Gilson, Peter Abelard, Al-Ghazali, William of Ockham.