

THE NATURE OF THEOLOGY, SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

Sr. Karla Maria Icaza, SCTJM

Fall 2012

In order to explain the nature of theology, science and philosophy and their relationship with each other, it is fitting to begin first by describing what each one is. And, what better example than Saint Thomas Aquinas, who was a great Catholic Philosopher in the History of Philosophy as well, as a great Theologian of the Catholic Church to help us.



In the First Lesson of our lectures, we learned that the Church has always cared deeply about Philosophy, and befittingly so. Eventhough they are unique, Theology and Philosophy both try to answer the same types of philosophical questions a person may ask, such as: What is good? How do you know when something is good or not? What determines what is good or evil? What makes a person good? Are we all good persons because we believe in God? Are we all bad persons because we don't believe in God?

To answer any of these philosophical questions, we will need to use our reason (Philosophy) and our beliefs (Theology). Does this mean these two disciplines are in conflict with each other or that they oppose each other? Absolutely not, it just means they are unequalled. Furthermore, Philosophy is the handmaid of Theology, which means reason is at the service of faith. However, later on we are going to see how these three disciplines (theology, philosophy, and science) complement each other. And, how one needs the others and vice-versa.

In his landmark encyclical on the relationship of faith to reason, *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason), Pope John Paul II writes: "The ultimate purpose of personal existence, then, is the theme of philosophy and theology alike." (FR, 15). He makes reference to the Acts of the Apostles and the first confrontation of Christian theology and philosophy which would be Paul's speech on the Areopagus in Athens to "certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" (17:18). Theology which is logically reasoned discourse about God owes much of its effectiveness in communicating the Gospel to philosophy for the foundation of its "reasoned discourse". Though theology depends on the light of divine revelation and so can never be completely reduced to human definition and logic, still it is received by human beings and so the ideas presented in faith cannot be seen as logically contradictory or absurd.¹

Philosophy literally means "the love of wisdom" in Greek. The term has been used to refer to all the reasoned examinations of every aspect of the world from nature to human life.¹

The way Blessed John Paul II expresses the relationship of faith to reason in *Fides et Ratio* summarizes perfectly how these two depend so much on each other. And, one cannot work without the other. For example, there are some things we know by faith alone, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, but these two cannot be proved by reason alone. We believe them to be true by faith, however, to prove them in any other way, it would be impossible. The existence of God, on the other hand, can be proved by reason alone. Since we can, with our sense knowledge just by looking at the universe alone know that some greater Being created it.

Science on the other hand is about experiments, researches, observations, methods, etc. When we come to the full understanding that God created all three of them, precisely for all of them to work together as a unified whole, we know there had to have been a reason. What this reason is we will never know, for we will never know the mind of God. What we do know is that they were all meant to work together. Unfortunately, in the past, there has been some erroneous thinking that you couldn't study Philosophy or Science because they were against the study of Theology. This is so not true. How this erroneous belief came about, we will never know. Nevertheless, is never too late to start shifting gears and start seeing the unity which exists between them, and encourage others, especially seminarians to study Philosophy and Science, in order to be able to understand better Theology.

All three of them are in search for the truth, however, they use different venues to arrive at their conclusions. Blessed John Paul II said that ideally all three of these disciplines should function as a unity. This is so very true.

Theology must recognize the legitimate autonomy of philosophy. Philosophical method is based on the evident and proofs of things open to sense knowledge. This evidence cannot be substituted by theological principles within the realm of philosophy or science itself. The very good use of the experimental method is to give man a more complete picture of the various possibilities of the universe open to the investigation of sense knowledge. The panoply of the various galaxies should provide us with a greater appreciation for the grandeur of the creator. The deep investigation of the human mind and will and passions should help impress upon us the mystery of man and the depth of the powers of both the human body and soul.¹

We study different philosophers to learn about them, about their thoughts, about their contribution to society as a whole. Some we may agree with, others, we may not. We will either reject their thinking or accept it. But, one thing is for sure, we will always learn something new from them, even if we don't necessarily agree with their answers or findings. And, this is what I find fascinating about these disciplines, especially Philosophy.

It is so important to understand clearly the autonomy of each, and hear what others have to say about each of their different disciplines. They are experts in their fields, such as Saint Thomas Aquinas, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and many others.

God gave us an intellect to think, to reason, and to acquire knowledge, therefore, it is absolutely essential that we use it wisely, this is what I believe it is rightly called sense knowledge. In life, for the most part, we become aware of our surroundings by seeing them or touching them, but first the idea has to come into our intellect (which is to recognize what a thing is) then we acquire the knowledge of what those things are through our senses. And, here is where the study of Philosophy comes into play, because Philosophy seeks to understand all that can be known about reality through reason.

Philosophy is the knowledge of everything that exists as determined by their causes which are open to the investigation of reason alone. The material object which is the subject matter of the science would be everything that exists. Philosophy can search for the ultimate explanations of everything which exists. Because it seeks ultimate causes, Philosophy can also examine the nature of God and so it has a metaphysical character in itself. The science of metaphysics would be at the basis of all the various kinds of philosophy in their material objects.¹

Science in the beginning was identified with various branches of philosophy. Since the 17th century and the general rejection in Western thought of metaphysics, science has come to be identified with those areas of human thought which are limited to the investigation of sense knowledge alone. This so-called scientific method is further refined to mean only those facts which can be verified by limited, controlled laboratory experiment.¹

Theology is a science because it is a reasoned discourse which is expressed by the "logy" part of the term; it is about God which is the "theos" part of the term. It is like science in that it involves concepts, definitions and reasoning. It is unlike science in that the origin of its principles does not come from reason, but from faith.¹

We need all three, not only because God created them, but because they complement each other. All three of them help us advance in the knowledge of truth, each one in their own unique style. Ultimately, we are all searching for the truth, the question is how do we find it? Where do we begin to look for it? First, and foremost, through the gift of faith, which was given freely to us by God at our baptism, then through the use of our reason (intellect). In order to lead us to the truth, our faith has to make sense. And finally through the use of certain sciences, which can aid us at arriving at the truth through the development of experiments, researches, methods, etc.

Saint Thomas Aquinas is a fascinating example of all these three disciplines, even now, he still has many followers. It is interesting to see how after so many years, there are people (young and old) who are still drawn to Him. The Catholic Church has given him the well-deserved title 'Doctor of the Church', because He taught the truth, and nothing of what He taught goes against the Catholic Church Teachings.

Saint Thomas Aquinas is the patron of Catholic schools. Thomas has been recommended to Catholic philosophers and theologians as their principal guide. The assumption is that he can aid them in their task.

Their task, in a nutshell, is to attain the truth.²

Saint Thomas has rightly been considered the Christian philosopher par excellence because he was not put off by the fact that the ideas he used to explain Christian theology were taken from sources which ranged from paganism to the important Muslim and Jewish philosophers of his day. He firmly maintained that there were two kinds of truth taught in theology: those which remain open to the investigation and proof of reason and philosophy alone and those for which faith is absolutely necessary.¹

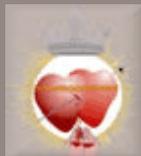
In conclusion, all three disciplines are necessary for the human person to acquire the necessary knowledge to attain the truth. They were meant to be used together, this is what God intended. They cannot contradict each other, because one needs the other and vice-versa. Philosophy needs Theology, as much as Theology needs Philosophy. Theology uses reason to understand what is accepted by faith through Revelation. Therefore, we can be certain that true Philosophy will always be at the service of Theology, this is what Saint Thomas Aquinas taught and this is also what the Catholic Church teaches.

Theology is founded on the light of faith, so philosophy is founded on the natural light of reason, which is why it is impossible that what philosophy teaches should be contrary to what is of faith.¹ The same can be said about Science, since science is a form of knowledge in which things are understood in terms of their causes.

¹Mullady O.P., Fr. Brian. "Notes from Lecture 1: Philosophy for Theologians". (Cromwell, CT: Holy Apostles College & Seminary).

²McInerney, Ralph, *A First Glance at St. Thomas Aquinas: A Handbook for Peeping Thomists*. (University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1990), 2.

[Back to Main Page of Teachings of SCTJM...](#)



Return to main page
www.piercedhearts.org

This page is the work of the Servants of the Pierced Hearts of Jesus and Mary
Copyright © 2010 SCTJM