

## **The 1931-1936 Christian Philosophy Debate**

Vatican I (1869-1870), the fourth chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Church, “Of Faith and Reason”:

The Catholic Church, with one consent, has also ever held and does hold that there is a two-fold order of knowledge, distinct both in principle and also in object; in principle, because our knowledge, in the one, is by natural reason, and, in the other, is by Divine faith; in object, because, besides those things to which natural reason can attain, there are proposed, for our belief, mysteries hidden in God, which, unless Divinely-revealed, cannot be known. . . .

And reason, indeed, enlightened by faith -- when it seeks earnestly, piously, and somberly -- attains by a gift from God some understanding of mysteries, even a very fruitful one; partly from the analogy of those things which it naturally knows, partly from the relations which the mysteries bear to one another and to the last end of man. But reason never becomes capable of apprehending mysteries as it does those truths which constitute its proper object. . .

But although faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason, since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind. And God cannot deny Himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth. The false appearance of such a contradiction is mainly due, either to the dogmas of faith not having been understood and expounded according to the mind of the Church, or to the inventions of opinion having been mistaken for the verdicts of reason.

. . . . Therefore, all faithful Christians are not only forbidden to defend, as legitimate conclusions of science, such opinions as are known to be contrary to the doctrines of faith, especially if they have been condemned by the Church, but are altogether bound to account them as errors which put on the fallacious appearance of truth.

And not only can faith and reason never be opposed to one another, but they are of mutual aid one to the other. For right reason demonstrates the foundations of faith, and enlightened by its light, cultivates the science of Divine things; while faith frees and guards reason from errors, and furnishes it with manifold knowledge. Therefore, so far is the Church from opposing the cultivation of human arts and sciences, that it in many ways helps and promotes them. For the Church neither ignores nor despises the benefits of human life which result from the arts and sciences, but confesses that, as they came from God, the Lord of all science, so, if they be used rightly, they lead to God by the help of His grace. Nor does the Church forbid that each of these sciences, in its sphere, should make use of its own principles and its own methods. But, while recognizing this just liberty, it stands watchfully on guard, lest sciences, setting themselves against Divine teaching or transgressing their own limits, should invade and disturb the domain of faith.

The Positive Cultural Wave: Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris* (1879), subtitled ““On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy in Catholic Schools in the Spirit of the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas,”” resulted in an expanded pride of place for the theology and philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, and by effect also encouraged the recovery of Late Classical and Medieval Christian thinkers in general, especially Augustine, Anselm, Bonaventure, Scotus and Ockham. It encouraged both the use of the philosophy of Aquinas in Catholic educational institutions and the foundation of institutes and publishing projects to study of the history of Scholastic thought in general.

The Negative Cultural Wave: Pius X’s *Pascendi dominici gregis* (1907) famously outlined the heresies of modernism and took Aquinas’s system to be a litmus test for what could and could not be taught. In 1910 it led to the famous Anti-Modernism Oath to be taken by all Catholic bishops, priests, and teachers. (The Oath was taken until 1967.)

### The Debate in the Societies

- 1925 *Société Française de Philosophie* began a debate on mysticism.
- 1928 *Société Française de Philosophie* debate, “Dispute on Atheism”
- 1930 *Société Française de Philosophie* debate, “God and Philosophy”
- 1931 *Société Française de Philosophie* debate on the nature and possibility of Christian philosophy. [Key meeting]
- 1933 the *Société Thomiste* also focused on the topic of Christian philosophy
- 1933 the *Société d’Etudes Philosophiques* focused on Maurice Blondel’s *Le problème de la philosophie chrétienne*

### **The Basic Debate and Conclusions**

#### Is Christian philosophy possible?

1. NO—Human philosophy is too corrupt and misguided to be of any value to Christian faith and practice. It will inevitably infect Christian concerns and should be avoided.
2. NO—Philosophy is a separate natural discipline open to all people, so Christians should study philosophy and be philosophers, but there is nothing distinctly Christian about it.
3. SOMEWHAT—Christian theology sets the parameters beyond which philosophy cannot go and helps correct false conclusions that human philosophers reach.
4. SOMEWHAT—Christian theology and experience help identify concepts and phenomena that human philosophy otherwise overlooks and thus provides new concepts and experiences for philosophy to consider.
5. YES—Philosophy helps explore and better understand what Christian faith affirms and believes.
6. YES—Christian beliefs and experience help identify what philosophy is groping after in less defined ways. It names the “end” of the philosophical search.
7. YES—Yet Christian philosophy is an entirely or substantially different practice than “secular” philosophy and is concerned with the pursuit of wisdom and understanding. It may at times interact with secular philosophy in order to test itself or to display its difference.

### **The Positions Identified**

1. Fideism (“theologism”): The position that Christian doctrine or theology is the sole content of Christian philosophy; there can be no natural philosophy with any truth value. [Karl Barth; Lev Shestov]
2. Rationalism: Those positions that deny the status of philosophy to Christian thought that references divine revelation. Philosophy must be dependent upon the sufficiency of human reason. Pronouncements by a Magisterium are particularly disqualified. [Emile Bréhier, Léon Brunschvicg]

3. Second (Neo-)Scholasticism: Positions that separate into two streams Christian revelation and natural philosophy with differing methods and ends. Christianity may even help the philosopher ask good questions, but the answers must be philosophy's and not theology's. The term "Christian philosophy" is, therefore, a confusing one. [Léon Noël, Fernand Van Steenberghen]
4. Maurice Blondel's position: That Christianity provides the answers to the questions that philosophy asks. In this sense, natural philosophy is insufficient to discover certain solutions without the aid of Christian theology. At the same time, the tensions between rationalistic philosophy and Christian reflection have an open-ended, heterogeneous aspect that encourages Christian thought to safeguard its supernatural insights from being reduced to symbolic or historical natural concepts alone. Therefore, there is a particular journey that a Christian philosophy must undertake in order to engage contemporary philosophy and the Christian mysteries.
5. Etienne Gilson's position: That Christianity has made genuine contributions to the history of philosophy, though there is some understandable debate about which thinkers were primarily theologians as opposed to philosophers. Nevertheless, revelation is an auxiliary to reason, and a necessary one, for faith and reason share the quest for understanding. There are key areas of thought (e.g. the existence of God, the nature of the world, the meaning of the human soul, a metaphysics of Being) which have been of particular importance to Christian thought.
6. Jacques Maritain's position: Christianity provides philosophy with particular data it might otherwise overlook, and Christian grace helps clear the mind of the believing philosopher to pursue the philosophical quest with clarity and freedom from bad motives. Philosophy is possible because of natural human reason's ability to engage the real, yet the intellect also needs certain contemplative qualities to shore it up. Moral philosophy is under the authority of theology in a way that speculative philosophy is not.
7. Gabriel Marcel's position: The Christian Incarnation is a philosophical scandal, but a necessary one. Christian philosophy must give an account not only of how Christian thought has influenced other thought (including the history of philosophical thought), but also why the Christian mystery has made this possible at all. The Christian philosopher's own sacramental experience shapes the kind of questions that he or she asks.
8. Henri de Lubac's position: If we recognize that Christianity has provided both thought and data to Western philosophy, we must also recognize what a philosophy of insufficiency reveals, that there is a complete and comprehensive philosophy which is Christianity and which is other than "mainstream" (i.e. rationalist) Western philosophy.