On the Relationship between Theology and Philosophy

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Tertullian
160 - 225 AD

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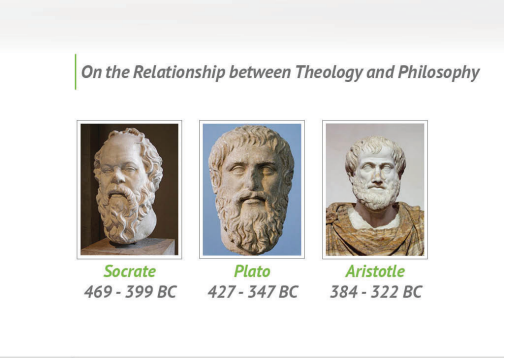
Philosophy: *Phileo (love) and Sophia (wisdom)*

The love of wisdom in Western civilization has been indelibly stamped by Greek thought.

"What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" questioned the Roman theologian Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225) in On the Rule of the Heretics. What correspondence, overlap, or mutual edification is there between the realm of secular wisdom and the realm of theological activity, as we have been discussing it? We gave a preliminary answer to this question last time in our discussion of natural theology and the role of human reason in knowing God. Theology engages human reason. It thinks and speaks terms about divine reality, but under the tutelage of God's reason, the living Logos. Theology reflects the wisdom of the cross. We must now elaborate on that answer to include a field of study often associated with theology, namely, philosophy.

To begin with, we must be clear about the meaning of the term "philosophy." This word is composed of two Greek roots: phileo (love) and sophia (wisdom). Etymologically, then, philosophy connotes "the love of wisdom." A little more fully, philosophy refers to the study of being, knowledge, and existence by rational argument and analysis. That is the field in verb form. In noun form, it refers to collected products of such study; to philosophies of the good, the right, the true.

In both senses, the love of wisdom in Western civilization has been indelibly stamped by Greek thought, specifically that dating from the era just prior to and encompassing the reign of Alexander the Great (beg. 336 BC). While Homeric myths date from well before the time of Alexander's conquests, as do other important and enduring streams of Hellenistic thinking (such as Pythagoras' theorems), it is the method and teachings of Socrates (469–399 BC), Plato (427–347 BC), and Aristotle (384–322 BC) that have been most influential in shaping the way that Europeans and Americans assess what is and is not true, right, and good. It was also the legacy of these men, which exerted the greatest pressure on the doctrinal formulations of the early church, as leading figures tried both to distance themselves from



Hellenistic thought-structures and to work within them. The collective Platonic tradition was the constant conversation and debate partner of church fathers into the medieval period, and it continues to play a role, however subconsciously, in the beliefs and practical decisions of Christians today.

The influence of Platonism is of such significance that it bears illustration at least by way of one brief example. A predominant characteristic of this tradition is dualism.

"Dualism" refers to the theoretical division of various realities into two distinct constituents. The idea that the world is comprised of spirit and matter is a kind of dualism, or that the human is soul and body. Eastern philosophies tend to be monistic in speaking of such things, that is, they tend to think of the cosmos as an integrated totality and of the human as merely an extension of the unending source of being, a form of the life force that constructs and animates the universe.

The West individuates the human relative to the Cosmos and its creatures.

By contrast, the West individuates the human relative to the cosmos and its creatures, usually by positing some kind of unique quality like the capacity to reason or the ability to create that is not exhibited in others' life-forms. This, in turn, becomes the basis for distinguishing between part and counterpart in the human: Our defining quality is rationally ability, the organ of the intellect, which seeks to exercise itself in passions and bodily activities, but often stands in tension with our emotions and physical drives. In other words, we are basically a reasoning mind or soul inhabiting a body. Our highest being is in the triumph of the mind over the passions of the flesh, and most of us will struggle our entire lives to achieve this victory. The heritage of Platonic dualism in Western Christianity can be seen in casual conversation about human destiny. What does "resurrection" mean? Asked to describe this happening, many Christians say that it is the rational soul's escape from the body and material existence. Our corpses will decay into nothingness and our inner beings will rise to immortality. The mind's struggle for supremacy throughout life will end in victory in the afterlife.

But is this the case? Are we humans really such composite entities, and is resurrection the final victory of one part of us over the corrupted counterpart? Just because this idea might more or less express the beliefs many of us have inherited, does that make it authentic and right?

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Paul speaks of a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15)
- *Unified whole*
- *Jesus' resurrected body*

Consider 1 Corinthians 15. When Paul speaks of resurrection in this passage, he talks of a spiritual body. He does not separate out a soul from our corporeal existence, but seems to view us as such a unified whole that our resurrected condition will necessarily involve our bodies too. Maybe he was recalling Christ's resurrection and the fact that Jesus' disciples recognized Him as Jesus, as possessing the physical characteristics of the Jew from Nazareth with whom they had lived and from whom they had learned, and not just as a phantom or apparition. Although He was able to pass through walls, He also was able to eat food without it passing through Him. Although He was able suddenly to appear among His disciples, they apparently could touch Him, putting fingers into His wounds. Even in His resurrected state, He possessed bodily form.

Reason must be aided by the revelation of God's Word.

This brief example surfaces the key issue: reason, even extraordinarily influential collections of reason, must be aided by the revelation of God's Word if we are rightly to understand God, creation, and the destiny of all things. We cannot simply receive the concepts of deity, humanity, and resurrection and slip them into popular ways of comprehending the world that we have absorbed, consciously or unconsciously. God's Word must correct our philosophies at the most basic levels. Does that make God's Word allergic to our philosophies? No. Once more, God's Word takes up our reason and experience and makes it adequate both to receive His truth and express it. How, then, should we articulate the relationship between theology and philosophy? The Continuum of Possible Relationships: From Complete Rejection to Complete Integration.

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Continuum of Possible Relationships: From Complete Rejection to Complete Integration

Initially, we identify a continuum as we look across the history of Christian thought on this matter, a spectrum of possible relationships between the disciplines, along which we can identify three principal points. At one end is complete integration. This is the idea that Christian theology can fully incorporate the insights of philosophy into its doctrinal formulations, allowing those insights to inform and even structure the parameters of our thought and speech of God.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) represents such a perspective. He argued that Greek philosophy in many respects prepared Gentiles for the gospel in the way that the OT Law prepared the Israelites. The notion of logos, of God as the Source of all being, of "the good"—these things laid a conceptual foundation upon which the revelation of God in Jesus Christ could build. The reality

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Justin Martyr
(100 - 165 AD)

- Argued that Socrates professed belief in Jesus Christ
- Logos spermatikos "seed of the Word"

of Christ as the Word through which God creates and re-creates all being could be integrated into the preparatory matrix supplied by Plato and his interpreters.

Similarly, Justin Martyr (c. 100–c. 165) contended that the Platonic hero Socrates, though condemned as an atheist by his contemporaries, in essence professed belief in Jesus Christ to the extent that he acknowledged the reality of the eternal Word Himself. In embryonic form, we find in his thinking a "seed of the Word," logos spermatikos, Justin taught. In a sense, Socrates and other Hellenistic philosophers were pre-Christian Christians. Their knowledge of divine things assimilated within the full revelation of God so well that God's revelation could be viewed as fulfilling their philosophical speculation.

On the other end of the spectrum stood Tertullian. In rhetorically asking about the connection between Athens and Jerusalem, as noted in our opening citation, Tertullian implied complete rejection of any association between philosophy and theology. In contrast to Justin and Clement, Tertullian disallowed the possibility that Greek philosophy and Christian revelation could be seamlessly integrated by way of preparation or fulfillment.

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Tertullian: Believed philosophy to contain and sow the seeds of heresy.

Rather than seeds of Christian thought, Tertullian found philosophy to contain and sow the seeds of heresy. For instance, Plato's "heavens" are filled with a multifarious hierarchy of beings at various stages of immateriality, most of which cannot be reconciled with the New Testament. There is no ready cross-reference in the New Testament for the Platonic notion of aeons emanating from some eternal aeon, the least of which is the cause of evil and source of the material realm. The Christian faith allows for no such chain of divine and semi-divine beings. It ascribes the work of creation directly to God Almighty. The Christian is not helped by thoughts that muddy up this fact but is hurt, not led to truth but to error. Attempting to find a connection between God's revelation and Plato's speculation about the realm and ways of intermediary deities can only lead into confusion about the nature and work of Christ Jesus.

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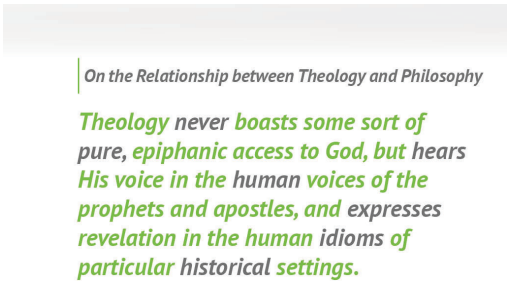
The Christian **confesses** the truth of God's Word **over** and against **popular** wisdom.

The Christian confesses the truth of God's Word over and against popular wisdom. Of these two poles, Tertullian's is preferable. His critical posture toward philosophy more nearly approximates that of the Reformers, who likewise appreciated the fact that there can be no reciprocity between the gains of secular wisdom and those of divine revelation. It will always prove a bad fit to slip the foot

of Jesus Christ into the sandal of any philosophical or scientific system. That is because it is Christ who endows all claims to truth with meaning, not the other way around.

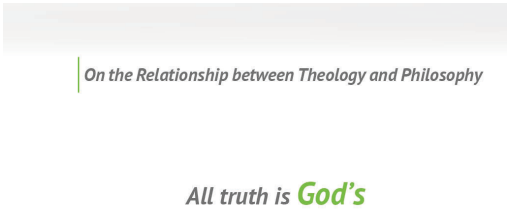
Christian theology can never allow itself to be subsumed under any philosophical, psychological, antropological, or cosmological insight.

Christian theology can never allow itself to be subsumed under any philosophical insight or, for that matter, any psychological, anthropological, or cosmological insight, either, however brilliant, because the subject matter of Christian theology is His own condition of truth. It is the living Word. All other truths can only substantiate the prior truth of Christ, and never constitute it. Nevertheless, neither pole of our continuum is satisfactory. That is because, as we have seen, God's Word lives and is active in human words.



God does not leave reason unaided, but He does engage human reason in His revelation. He does really speak in human terms and allow the human mind to grow into His truth. He does make humans to anticipate Christ and to declare Him, not humans who are themselves fit for the light, for there is no such thing, but humans whose minds are also darkened by sin. Theology never boasts some sort of pure, epiphanic access to God, but hears His voice in the human voices of the prophets and apostles and expresses His revelation in the human idioms of particular historical settings.

If we look to Scripture to adjudicate the relationship between its content and the content of secular wisdom, we discover a position between the two poles just named. Let's discuss in general terms what is taught in the book of Job, this magisterial contribution to Israel's wisdom tradition.



Above all, Job teaches that all truth is God's. It teaches that God is not impervious to human concepts of what is true, but works with them in correcting them. God establishes truth in and of Himself as He speaks in terms familiar to human logic. That is the conclusion the man Job is hemmed into as he contemplates the great tragedy of his life. God does not simply fit the schematic of fair play that Job thought appropriate of Deity, rewarding good behavior with blessings and bad behavior with curses.

What resources does Job, his friends, or any human have to decide what constitutes "good" and "bad" behavior, anyway, except the self-serving instincts of a fallen mind? The true God is not simply the outcome, validation, or champion of discrete notions of right and wrong, whether held individually or corporately. From the

whirlwind, God speaks a definitive "No" to that arrangement. Yet He does speak. He is not summoned, but He does come to us. He does bestow mercy upon Job in His judgment of him and his companions. He does say, "yes" in and through His "no."

So we are left with this option: Any truth we derive is "true" so long as it is one with God's self-defining life and act. Even the most exact conclusions of the most exacting deduction rely upon the grace of God, His willed self-determination to preserve the world in this way, according to these "laws," for instance, as if they were really laws for our having. We are not in a position to hold God accountable to the laws of morality, of nature, or of social engagement, even as He may will to uphold and make Himself accountable to them. This world and its constructs are ultimately God's to sustain, His to enact, and ours to receive. He is as accountable to them as He makes Himself to be, such that we can anticipate finding Him in their terms, but only according to His promise and never according to our right.

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*Any **truth** we derive is "true" so long as it is **one** with God's **self-defining** life and act.*

If this is so, then theology relates to philosophy as a reminder of the inherently contingent nature of human claims to truth. It does not do so with an air of conceit, but just the opposite. It is the first; the most definitively and absolutely convinced that human thought and speech are a secondary exercise in gratitude for God's truth. It humbly yet joyfully extols truth as reality made after the Lordship of God in His Word. It finds truth within the parameters and under the influence of His revelation. It therefore does not completely accept the claims of philosophy, nor does it completely reject them. Instead, it critically appropriates them, making free use of philosophical findings as an enterprise that is neither cowed in by nor beholden to them.

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This third position is that of Augustine of Hippo (354–430). He articulated it in his excurses "On Christian Doctrine" (c. 397). Augustine derived his position on the relationship between theology and philosophy in this work from the Exodus account, as well as from the description of Moses in the book of Acts. He concluded that theology "plunders" from philosophy as the Israelites plundered from the Egyptians. Just as the fleeing Israelites left triumphantly, just as these slaves took from their masters whatever they saw fit under the command and authority of God, and just as Moses himself was trained by the Egyptians and was able to take what was profitable in what he learned, so also theology takes from philosophy whatever is of constructive value, also under the authority of God.

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Augustine of Hippo
(354 - 430 AD)

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The loneliness of the theologian

We are dealing with the power and wisdom of God.

Once more, theology conducts itself this way because it recognizes that all truth is accountable to God. Thus, theology never passes an uncritical word of judgment on the wisdom of the world, either a yes or a no.

It is the first to hear God's no to human conclusions accompanied by His yes, His denial of our right to have Him accompanied by His right to come to us and to have us. Our nos and yeses, in turn, are only echoes of this fundamental situation. Our nos are only reiteration of the priority of God in a thought-world that increasingly inclines to render Him a subordinate nonfactor. Our yeses, then, are affirmations of the ways that this or that insight deepen or extend our comprehension of the nature of God in creating this world, sustaining it, and bending it to His will.

We may as well not be shy about the fact that this way of operating can be lonely. We really do live at a time and in a culture when the love of God has become more or less irrelevant to the love of wisdom. Demonstrating how the findings of wisdom are under the judgment and mercy of God, how their truth shines fullest when it contributes to our knowledge of God and inspires us to a greater love of God, is not a welcome enterprise. Yet it is the job of the theologian.

It is thus also true of the theologian that, "no servant is above his master" (Matt. 10:24). If Christ had to stand before Pilate and teach the truth of God in servant humility, if the wisdom of His suffering was foolishness to this Roman view of the world, then why should we now stand as lord over the truth claims of the secular mind? Why should we not expect to teach truth from the standpoint of the suffering servant? Whatever triumphal procession we may, here and there, walk in among the halls of academia, our cup is one of confrontation and, more often than not, rejection no less than Christ's. We do well not to seek a way around this fact, but to embrace the power and wisdom of God in the lowliest of circumstances.

That said, we are dealing with the power and wisdom of God. Our sense of solitude does not compromise the glory of His reality. Our lowliness does not undermine His authority. It is as true in the academy as anywhere else that God's power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). His grace is sufficient in the library, laboratory, and classroom too!

Therefore, we are not given license to mope about in our loneliness as theologians. There is no justification to throw our hands in the air and pity our lot, like Elijah in a land of false prophets.

For us too there is encouragement that God is still king, that His covenant with us still stands, and He is still at work in His creation; and so there is still the obligation and internal compulsion to carry out our duties with patience and resolve, to engage the world of ideas, not with reticence and suspicion but with winsome eagerness to see the truth of God in them.

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Critical appropriation is a middle path neither immediate acceptance nor immediate rejection of secular wisdom...

Again, critical appropriation is a middle path, neither immediate acceptance nor immediate rejection of secular wisdom, but hopeful interaction with the full range of knowledge,

which hope comes from faith in the power of the living God to make truth known among those who seek it. I conclude with this set of observations because I have had the pleasure of teaching students who are not majors in theology. They are pursuing degrees in other fields, and in many cases can articulate a sense of calling to excellence in those fields.

Some students are suspicious of the findings of philosophy, biology, psychology, and sociology.

Unfortunately, a great number of these students come from backgrounds that are suspicious of the findings of philosophy, biology, psychology, sociology, and so forth. They have had their faith cultivated in a church environment that just as sharply distinguishes between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of creaturely realities as any atheistic philosopher or scientist, only despising the latter rather than the former.

Such students often end up having to live two lives—one motivated by a semi-secret love of the wisdom of their field, the other motivated by an overt mistrust of the wisdom of their field. Let me be clear that this is a tragic and decidedly unbiblical situation. There is no reason for the Christian to fear and hate even the godless findings of secular wisdom, for her God is so much God that He has always made Himself known among godlessness.

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See the glory of God in human reason and experience.

The task of the Christian philosopher or scientist is certainly more demanding than that of the godless philosopher or scientist, or that of the pious anti-philosopher or anti-scientist, but her reward is also much greater. For it is only she who will see the glory of God in human reason and experience, who will perceive the daily victories of God in the world of knowledge. And we may dare to imagine what the world of wisdom could look like in the

future if it were more fully populated by Christians who critically appropriate its findings in service to God's truth. Perhaps in such a world the burden of theological loneliness might also be made lighter!