

The New Proximity between Theology and Philosophy

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Jean Grondin

Ever since Book E of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, the relations between philosophy and theology have been most intimate. Aristotle uses the word « *theologikè* » only in this passage, which has sparked many since Paul Natorp's groundbreaking essay of 1888¹, to believe that it was not from Aristotle. But the text is so momentous that one would then have to invent a thinker of his stature as its author, say an Aristotle II. Whoever that genius was (one thing is certain, he too must have attended Plato's school), he set the framework for a relation that would obtain for two millennia : philosophy, as a quest for wisdom, is a search for the causes, the ultimate causes or the beginnings (*archai*) of things, that can be suspected in the realm of the divine. Thus, *theology* occupies and fills the position of *protè philosophia* (according to *Met. E*), of first philosophy, that Aristotle elsewhere characterizes as a science of the first principles and in other passages as a science of Being qua Being. Aristotle furthermore buttressed this close relation between theology and philosophy by claiming that the activity of the divine consisted in nothing but thinking, indeed in the thinking of thinking (*noesis noeseos*). The divine was thus understood as the realm of pure, literally self-contained reason. It is in this rational order in which we take part when we attempt - but can only do so for brief instants (*pote*) - to elevate ourselves to the level of thinking. Aristotle thus founded what Hans Krämer called the *Geistesmetaphysik*, the metaphysics of spirit, predicated on the assumption that the divine order is a

¹ « Thema und Disposition der aristotelischen Metaphysik », *Philosophische Monatshefte*, 1888, 37-65, 540-574. Whereas W. Jaeger thought that *Met. E. 1* was an early work of Aristotle, given its Platonic resonances, Ingemar Düring (*Aristoteles. Darstellung und Interpretation seines Denkens*, Heidelberg, Winter, 1966, 117) believed the use of the word « *theologikè* » was a sudden intuition on the part of the Stagirite, but with no major consequence for his work : « Sonst hat Aristoteles den Ausdruck θεολογικὴ weiter nie ernsthaft gebraucht. Der Name war ein zufälliger Einfall, parenthetisch motiviert, und hat keine Spur in seinen Schriften oder denen seiner Nachfolger hinterlassen ». Düring concluded that the time had come to abandon the notion of an Aristotelian « theology » (but what else did one find in *Metaphysics Lambda*?) : « Mir scheint es, daß die Zeit gekommen ist, den Ausdruck « die Theologie des Aristoteles » aufzugeben oder ihm wenigstens den ihm zukommenden anspruchlosen Platz zuzuweisen: er war ein bloßer Einfall, als Aristoteles ein Wort suchte, um die schöne Dreizahl zu erreichen. Überhaupt hat man die Bedeutung der Systematisierung der Wissenschaften bei Aristoteles übertrieben. Erst nach ihm, und vollends bei den neuplatonischen Kommentatoren, wurde die Einteilung der Philosophie als Selbstzweck betrieben. »

perfectly rational one,² and hence one that can be fathomed by our own intelligence when it raises itself to its highest possibility.

The proximity between philosophy and theology could not be closer, nor more rational : theology is a science (*logos*) of the divine (*theos*), and philosophy is a quest for a wisdom concerning the first causes, which can be found in the divine. The proximity, if not identity, between philosophy and theology, only obtains however under the auspices of what one would later call « natural » reason. Things will change dramatically, yet not entirely, with the appearance of a theology that is founded not on reason, but on Revelation. It will introduce a new, perhaps unavoidable tension between the pretensions of philosophy and those of theology. As everybody knows, this tension can be traced back to the Sacred Texts themselves, when Paul, for example, calls the wisdom of this world « pure folly » (1 Co 1, 20). It is indeed somewhat of a foolishness to claim to know the divine through our feeble and self-consumed reason. If available, true theology should rest on Revelation that occurs through Scripture, through the Incarnation itself, but also throughout tradition and the Church. The relationship between theology and philosophy could thus become one of tension and indeed opposition. This opposition has been maintained in our century by a towering theologian like Karl Barth. He was widely accused of succumbing to a « positivism of Revelation », but on the part of theologians, I would think this is quite understandable. In philosophy, we could only dream of such a source! As a popular song has it : « nothing compares ».

But I cannot speak here for theology or theologians, I can only try to speak for my trade, philosophy. What was the position of philosophy vis-à-vis such a theology? Originally, the philosophers of Greek Antiquity treated Revelation with condescendence, already evident in the discourse Paul gave, or tried to give in Athens (*Acts* 17, 32). The philosophers weren't impressed by his preaching (nor was Paul, for that matter, impressed by philosophy itself, as we have seen). Despite the evident antipathy, it was evident that the message of Revelation was itself articulated in a conceptual medium that was secretly borrowed from philosophy : the doctrine of the *logos* and the doctrine of the soul were couched in a platonic terminology, and later, when the Church fathers would develop the dogma of Trinity, they would strongly rely on the neo-platonic vocabulary of emanation. Knowingly or not, theology thus used the conceptual instruments of (rational) philosophy to formulate the message of Revelation. Of course, it is utterly impossible to offer here a sketch of the very complex cohabitation between philosophy and theology

² H. J. Krämer, *Der Ursprung der Geistesmetaphysik*, Amsterdam, B. R. Grüner, 1964.

throughout the ages. It also strongly varied from one author to the next. But the essentials remained the same : basically, philosophy was founded on reason, theology on Revelation, yet, they still aimed at the *same* sort of wisdom about matters of « ultimate concern », that are not addressed by the other sciences.

This tension ensured, however, that the best philosophers were also always very much interested in theology. To name but a few, Augustin, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas, Occam, Suarez, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Schleiermacher, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Feuerbach were all outstanding philosophers, but also theologians of the highest order, if not first and foremost. This is mostly true for the tradition of German philosophy with which I am a bit more familiar. Kant and German Idealism are unthinkable without theology. The same is also true for authors like Nietzsche (son of a pastor), Dilthey (who worked on the theologian Schleiermacher), and, of course, for Martin Heidegger, who began his career as a candidate for the priesthood. As far as I can tell however, Heidegger was one of the last *major* philosophers to be very familiar with the state of theology. Not only did his life-path start off with theology and medieval philosophy, if not mysticism, Heidegger had intense discussions with theologians in Freiburg and Marburg, most notably with Rudolf Bultmann. He also wrote himself on theology and theological issues. In a well-known lecture of 1927 on « Theology and Phenomenology » he gave a thorough, yet scholastic sounding account of the relations between philosophy and theology (that he only published in the year 1969) : philosophy is a science of Being, whereas theology is a « positive » science, that deals with the « ontic » phenomenon of *Christlichkeit* or « Christianity ».

I am only recalling here things that are very well-known. The only modest point I would like to make is that, for some reason, Heidegger was perhaps the last *major* thinker to be so involved with theology. After him, philosophy became largely « untheological », with a few exceptions, of course : one could think, for instance, of Ernst Bloch (whose marxist philosophy of hope drew on theology, and greatly influenced the masterful « theology of hope » of my teacher Jürgen Moltmann), Christian Existentialism and figures like Hans Jonas, Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer³ and a few others. But for the main part, philosophers ceased to follow very closely the debates inside theology. This is, of course, evident for analytical philosophy, that is widespread in the English-speaking world and

³ For Gadamer's debate with Rudolf Bultmann, see my « Gadamer and Bultmann », in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, in the series *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2002.

that is most allergic to theology and any kind of discourse that transcends the realm of the empirically verifiable. Despite its deeper roots, continental philosophy was also mostly anti-theological. This is true of currents like existentialism (that Sartre framed as a form of militant atheism), structuralism and post-structuralism, that have been most influential. This also applies to the critique of ideologies in the mold of the Frankfurter School, even if authors like Adorno and Horkheimer had nostalgia about the « totally other », but that « totally other » was mostly understood as another *social* state of affairs. To sum up, abruptly, an entire chapter of thought, philosophers for about half a century were more interested in language (and verifiable language for analytic philosophy), for the predicament of the godless individual, for social and political structures than they were for theological matters. If one raised them, one was immediately suspected of trying to « convert » someone, as if those philosophers were not also doing the same thing with their own *Weltanschauungen*.

But, if I see things correctly, a new proximity between philosophy and theology has been discernable more recently (I cannot speak with any competence of the proximity of theologians to philosophy, but I believe *it* always existed and that many theologians remained influenced by philosophical developments, so much so in fact that it seems theologians were oftentimes doing less theology than philosophy, if not sociology, as if they felt their own discipline was somewhat *passé*). I mean by this that philosophers are suddenly more receptive to theological discourse. Before reflecting on the causes of this new proximity, I will evoke rapidly *some* of the evolutions I have in mind. The first impetus probably came from an author like Emmanuel Levinas who drew heavily on his own judaic background (and a thinker like Franz Rosenzweig) to call philosophy back to its own questions and the urgency of the ethical, that he described in very vertical, even theological terms, when he spoke, for instance, of the epiphany of the Other. Levinas' aim was, of course, to counteract the Heideggerian stress on the question of Being, that, Heidegger claimed, was the foremost, if not the only question of philosophy. This criticism of Heidegger's in-sistence on ontology and the metaphysical tradition propelled a generation of French scholars like Jean-Luc Marion⁴ and Michel Henry⁵ to discover in their own Christian tradition

⁴ J.-L. Marion, *L'Idole et la distance*, Grasset, 1977, 3e éd. Le Livre de Poche, 1991; *Dieu sans l'être*, Paris, Grasset, 1982., 2e éd. PUF, Quadrige, 1991; *Étant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, Paris, PUF, 1997; *De Surcroît*, Paris, PUF, 2001.

⁵ Cf. M. Henry, *C'est moi la Vérité. Une philosophie du christianisme*, Paris, Seuil, 1996. On these developments of French phenomenology, see the study by Jean Greisch, *Le Cogito herméneutique*, Paris, Vrin, 2000, chap. I, p. 13-50 : « Les yeux de Husserl en France. Les tentatives de refondation de la phénoménologie dans la deuxième moitié du XX^e siècle ».

phenomena that escaped the ontological and rational tradition of Western metaphysics, most notably the experience of love and gratuitous charity. This return was so striking that Dominique Janicaud spoke of a « theological » turn of French phenomenology⁶, that he himself viewed with a critical eye, since it seemed to him opposed to the basic trust of phenomenology : how could the science of the things as they are given become suddenly so enthralled with phenomena that *do not* appear? He found that methodically quite problematic.

In the foot-steps of Levinas, one can also name Jacques Derrida, who initially appeared to all to be a genuine structuralist or a « post-structuralist » in that he claimed that « everything was a text » and that we are confined in linguistic structures. But lately, it has become apparent that his own thinking about the strictures of language had dimensions that one would almost be tempted to deem « mystic » : the confinement of language would cover up a quest of what can never be said. With Gianni Vattimo, he published a collective volume on religion⁷ where he appears very sensitive to the « re-emergence » of the religious phenomenon and to what I would call the new proximity between philosophy and theology.

Gianni Vattimo is himself another important figure one can name in this conjunction, since he is one of the foremost representative thinkers and advocates of « post-modern » thinking. He understands « post-modernism » as an awareness about the interpretive, or hermeneutic, character of the world. Since we live in an interpretative universe, we have to become more tolerant about each other, in the awareness that our concepts are only feeble attempts to come to grips with the world. Hence his defense of a « weak » or more humble thinking. Vattimo's original intuition is that this new sense of charity and tolerance actually stems from Christianity, from its message of love, *kenosis* and reconciliation.⁸ Vattimo's impressive, albeit at first paradoxical sounding thesis is that it is the Nietzschean proclamation of the death of God and Heidegger's conception about the end of metaphysics that can help us rediscover the Christian experience of faith. The god that is dead is only the god of metaphysics, understood as an ultimate and necessary foundation of the objective universe. It is this god that militant « atheism » wanted to refute, but it did so, Vattimo recalls, with the same kind of objective certainty, and rigidity, that characterized metaphysical or objectivistic thinking. Atheism indeed claimed to have an ultimate and certain knowledge of the world. There

⁶ D. Janicaud, *Le Tournant théologie de la phénoménologie française*, Combas, Éditions de l'Éclat, 1991.

⁷ See G. Vattimo and J. Derrida (Dir.), *La Religion*, Paris, Seuil, Paris, 1996. See also J. Derrida, *Foi et Savoir*, Seuil, 2001.

⁸ See G. Vattimo, *Credo di credere*, 1996, and more recently, *Dopo la christianità*, Garzanti, 2002 (*After Christianity*, Columbia UP, 2002).

is no such thing, according to Vattimo. Militant atheism is thus no less dogmatic than « objectivistic » metaphysics. The overcoming of this horizon of metaphysics could permit us to reacquaint ourselves with the God of the Bible and its sense of historicity, event, contingency, that would correspond to our « post-modern » condition. The message of the Bible, Vattimo argues, is not a rational argument, it does not claim to have an ultimate knowledge of the world, it is, and knows it is a historical message, founded, like all our knowledge, on what we have heard (*fides ex auditu*⁹) and live by.

Through all these developments - and many others, no doubt - a new proximity between philosophy and theology has appeared and might be one silent reason behind this conference. In concluding, I will allude to the possible causes of this new proximity. They certainly have something to do with the disappearance of « marxism ». Sartre heralded marxism in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* as « the philosophical horizon of our time ». Even if most philosophers were not so blunt, the marxist *vulgata*, its social, political and ideological agenda indeed functioned as a presupposition of many developments in the field of contemporary continental philosophy, as was evident in the Frankfurter School, with its stress on the social, but also in structuralism very generally. This evaporation of « marxism » has nothing to do with any « triumph » of capitalism over marxism. Intellectual fashions are not that rational! Indeed, « Western » marxism flourished at a very prosperous time in the West (in the 60s and early 70s) and when the inefficiency - to say nothing of its totalitarian nature - of state-run economy was obvious for all to see. No, I believe that it suddenly dawned on people that marxism had indeed been a « vulgata », some kind of « hidden religion » or *Ersatz*-religiosity. Ernst Bloch was right all along when he claimed Marxism was based on a *Prinzip Hoffnung*, on the principle of hope. Yet, marxists had tried for generations to blur this evidence by insisting on the « scientific » nature of their critique of ideology (on which the early Habermas so insisted in his debate with Gadamer) or by heralding the allegedly « materialistic » and thus more objective character of the hope for another order of things. But this new order would still have to rest on a revolution, hence on a *metanoia* or « conversion » of the world. It was indeed a secret religious hope.

Is not this hope a constancy of human nature? Can it be replaced? My teacher Hans-Georg Gadamer repeated in one of his last interviews what he has been claiming for some time : « man cannot live without hope, that is the only sentence I would defend without any restriction ».¹⁰ What is this hope?

⁹ *Dopo la christianità*, 2002, 11.

¹⁰ « Die Menschen können nicht ohne Hoffnung leben », in the daily *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung*, February 11th, 2002.

Can philosophy think it through without learning from theology and the emphasis it has always put on soteriology? For his part, the German writer Ernst Jünger rightly wrote that the alleged « disappearance » of religion was an extraordinarily recent phenomenon, and one that was very limited in time and space, since it only concerns a very small part - and perhaps a very short interlude - of the history of Western civilization in which gods and divinities were constantly worshiped.¹¹ Indeed, the major struggles in world history have been and still are of a religious nature. This is particularly striking in the more recent conflict between the Islamic and the Westernized, judeo-christian world, that has replaced the East-West conflict, that was itself religiously underpinned. The new proximity between philosophy and theology can perhaps make us more aware of the challenges this situation poses to mankind. Both continental and analytic philosophy could thus be called upon to overcome their increasing provinciality.

The ultimate questions remain, and have always been present. It was indeed *hybris* to believe intellectuals could wipe away the religious heritage of mankind and replace it with demagogic substitutes. Philosophy can thus open itself anew to what religions and theologians have to say, as always did the best traditions of philosophy.

¹¹ Cf. E. Jünger (1895-1998), « Gestaltwandel » (1993), in his *Sämtliche Werke*, Stuttgart, vol. XIX, 1999, 609.