A Reply to Tom Weinandy

John Webster

My friend Tom Weinandy has taken my admittedly polemical words very seriously, so that a paper which was intended to provoke seminar discussion has also provoked dismay on the part of a theologian and colleague whose judgment I respect very highly. What I have written, I have written; others must judge its truth. But some things in Tom's response call for a brief reply.

First, the tone of my remarks, Tom says, betrays 'almost complete lack of sympathy' with *Fides et Ratio* and a 'dismissive attitude' bordering on 'the mocking'; 'if' he tells me, 'one restrains one's impatience and focuses one's mind'—which it looks like I have failed to do—things can be seen to be a good deal better than I have made them out to be. Maybe, though on re-reading *Fides et Ratio* I remain unconvinced that it is a first-rate piece of apostolic teaching. What I must make clear—and what the polemical tone evidently obscured—is that I am not at all opposed to bishops intervening in the academy: far from it. I entirely agree with Tom that much in the academy is 'inimical to the Christian gospel', and that Christian theologians can be victims of academic terrorism. My protest is not intended to suggest that the teaching office should leave the academy alone, but that its interventions must betray a consistently apostolic character. An episcopal judgment, if it is to be received as apostolic, has to commend itself by indicating the truth, and the rather bullying tactics deployed in some bits of *Fides et Ratio* simply do not help. It would be pushing me too far to say that I propose that the Bishop of Rome is 'no better than the Roman Catholic equivalent of a Soviet ideocrat of the Stalinist era'; all I said was that at times the encyclical seems to be requiring the academy to produce ideas to a set formula, and to be indulging in derogation by labelling. And I hope I am not alone in finding it hard to hear the apostolic voice in these tactics.

Second, Tom and I clearly read this section of *Fides et Ratio* differently. He thinks of it as merely offering parameters and principles within which philosophy may operate; I think that both in its account of faith and reason and in its metaphysics of the knowing human subject it recommends a particular style of philosophy. He thinks that the *auditus fidei* looms large; I think it is passed over too quickly. He thinks that 'universal concepts' are innocent; I think they carry a lot more freight.

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Of course, our different readings emerge from different dogmatic frameworks. Those in the Reformation tradition (at least until Kant came along to scold mere 'biblical theologians') found themselves reluctant to accept Roman Catholic affirmations of the capacity of reason to judge in accordance with nature, and reluctant to place much confidence in the theology of grace which underlies such affirmations.

Third, Tom and I make different judgments about what it is prudent to emphasise about faith and reason in the present context. My own judgment, which surfaces in my response to the encyclical, is that we need to learn to say no—that appeals to the capacity of 'graced reason' can only be made once we have listened long and hard to Pascal's 'not of the philosophers and scholars'. Of course, nearly everyone—various kinds of theological liberals, the authors of Radical Orthodoxy, even astute Catholic theologians like Tom—tell me this is the wrong tack to take, that it is alarmingly close to postmodern repudiations of reason, that it betrays a deficient theology of creation, and much else. We shall see. But the alternative in *Fides et Ratio* sounds too much like soft phenomenology for my comfort, and the failure to say no to that has left Western Christian theology in a real tangle.

Fourth, I think Tom actually shares some of my worries, and in conceding a couple of points he admits to real problems, though he is too loyal to turn the spotlight full on them. 'It would have been better', he says, 'to have had a more biblical anthropology', and all but allows me my point that a transcendental phenomenology of selfhood underlies this lack. And he thinks that '*Fides et Ratio* could have been more forthright and realistic in its assessment of sin'. Indeed it could; but isn't the failure to be so a miscalculation with pretty severe consequences for the whole?

Lastly: alliances, as Tom says, are important. I agree: the real fault lines in Western Christianity do not run between the churches but across the churches—above all, the fault line between those who think that the Christian gospel is to be articulated and defended as one version of something more basic than itself, and those (beleaguered, but not so much as they used to be) folk who beg to differ. Tom and I find ourselves allied in the latter group—a ragged but not undignified company of Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, Orthodox and even the odd disenfranchised Anglican. If I'm critical of the Bishop of Rome, it's not to upset the alliance, but to make sure that those mischievous philosophers of existence don't slip back in by the back door and begin once again to boss us around.

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