'Fides et Ratio', articles 64-79

John Webster

Two things ought to be said at the outset. The first is that it is an event of some significance far beyond the confines of Catholicism that the Bishop of Rome should address his fellow bishops on matters of the relationship of theology and philosophy. Whatever else we may say about the document before us, it emerges from a style of church leadership which refuses to absolve itself from the task of addressing questions of the intellectual articulation of the faith. Thereby it (quite properly) asks us some hard questions about those modern conventions whereby serious intellectual work is thought to be properly located only in the open fields of free enquiry (that is, in the institution of the university) and not in the cramped domestic culture of the church. I wonder if what has made some academics cross about *Fides et Ratio* is that the document refuses to stay behind the sanitary cordon with which institutions of higher learning sometimes surround themselves in order to protect their interests.

That is the first thing to be said. The second is this: it's a pity that an episcopal judgment on these issues doesn't do a better job of staking its claims. Partly it's a matter of style: at times the document adopts the threateningly paternalistic tone of communications from the Kremlin in the 1940s and 1950s, urging Socialist realism in art or music: not the sort of thing to provoke thinkers to do their best work, so much as a summons to produce the goods to an officially-approved set formula. Partly, again, it's a matter of method: there are points at which the document adopts one of the familiar tactics of intellectual terrorism, namely, labelling something as an '-ism' ('eclecticism,' 'modernism,' 'relativism,' and so on: see arts. 52, 55, 86–90), characterising it with a few broad strokes of the brush but naming no names, pointing out its dire faults and then leaving us worrying whether we or our colleagues are examples of it. It's a poor way of handling ideas in public, one which breeds an atmosphere of distrust and lack of curiosity, and inhibits real conversation. Although someone outside the Roman Catholic church can't speak with real authority on the pastoral politics of the document, it is worth saying that Anglicans who cherish misty-eyed visions of universal primacy might pause and ask themselves if this really is the only alternative to near (but not total) absence of episcopal *theological* leadership. Strategy aside, however, I want to try to engage what I think are some weaknesses in the central claims of the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01721.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

document about the relation between theology and philosophy, by asking about the adequacy of its depiction of the two disciplines, and about the doctrinal framework which it brings to bear on the discussion.

The section 'The Interaction Between Philosophy and Theology' (arts. 64–79) follows one of the low points of the document, namely the rather testy section 'The Interventions of the Magisterium in Philosophical Matters'. At points, that section reads like a communication to the parents of a disorderly pupil from a patently annoyed headmaster only just keeping his cool: the Holy Father is evidently 'disappointed' by the goings on in the rumpus room and thinks it's time to put things in order. Be that as it may, we move into slightly calmer waters with chapter 6, which looks at theology and philosophy in inter-relation—though the title doesn't quite match the contents, since the chapter also contains two quite lengthy articles on the relation of theology to culture. What do we find when we look there?

Article 64 begins by re-stating two of the basic principles of the encyclical: the universal scope of divine revelation, and the natural desire of all humankind to make sense of life: 'The word of God is addressed to all people, in every age and in every part of the world, and the human being is by nature a philosopher' (art. 64). We take the latter statement first. What lies behind it is an insistence throughout the encyclical that philosophy is best understood, not as one intellectual discipline alongside others, or as a particular mode of analysis, but as a human activity 'which is directly concerned with asking the question of life's meaning and sketching an answer to it' (art. 3). Human beings, on this account, are driven by a desire to know the ultimate truth of their existence, and the desire is given final expression in systematic philosophical theories (cf. Arts. 4, 25–9, 33). There are a number of things worth noting here which are crucial to understanding the document properly. First, philosophy is identified as what we might call 'perennial philosophy', the accumulated wisdom of the ages about ultimate issues, rather than as a set of analytical methods (see the critique of more restricted accounts of the philosophical task in arts. 47 and 56). Second, accordingly, philosophy is understood as a body of knowledge—in the chapter after that which we are here examining, the encyclical states a requirement for 'a philosophy of *genuinely metaphysical range*, capable ... of transcending empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate and foundational in its search for truth' (art. 83; cf. art. 50). Third, philosophy has the task of forming life and culture by furnishing humankind with ultimate grounds for thought and action (cf. art. 6). But, fourth, this all tends to promote a pretty a-historical account of philosophy, one which takes very scant notice of the political, social and cultural frameworks of thought, detaching

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01721.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosophical work from particular human projects, questions and activities. What the encyclical has in mind is not philosophy as a practice, but philosophy as a grand unified theory of reality which will provide the engine of an entire culture. At the very least, we ought to ask whether this view can avoid flattening out the history of philosophies, not just by showing little interest in their civil and cultural contexts, but by working on the assumption that there is a single thing called 'philosophy' to which theology is to relate itself. It may be that there is no such single entity, but rather a loose association of activities and forms of discourse whose relation to theology will be much more than that of offering a complementary scheme of ultimate reality.

If we are to ask why philosophy is defined in this way, the answer is to be found in the fact that the encyclical is quite firm about what constitutes the normative philosophy which is theology's conversation partner. The preferred philosophy is, roughly defined, a metaphysics of ultimacy which sets great store by the phenomenology of human world-openness or self-transcendence: the curious amalgam of quasi-existentialist anthropology and transcendental metaphysics which had ascendency in some European Christian circles in the mid-century. On this model, reason is the anthropological point of transcendence or intentionality: hence the frequent use of language of 'path' or 'journey' to talk of reason's movement towards ultimate truth, of which philosophy is the primary human expression, and which is completed in faith in divine revelation. The sort of philosophy which the encyclical holds up as a model is instanced in what it calls 'penetrating analyses of perception and experience, of the imaginary and the unconscious, of personhood and intersubjectivity, of freedom and values, of time and history' (art. 48). What is especially important about this philosophical orientation is its very high level of anthropological generality; like most phenomenology, it tends to underrate human historical specificity and be more interested in enduring structures of the human—as anyone who has plodded through Lonergan's *Insight* (or, indeed, through *The Acting Person*) will know, perhaps to their cost. And, moreover, it is arguable that—for all the praise for Aquinas—it is a rather modern mode of philosophical practice which is being favoured, one which is in important respects under-determined by theological doctrine.

Be that as it may, it is to this that theology has to relate: 'As a reflective and scientific elaboration of the understanding of God's word in the light of faith, theology for its part must relate, in some of its procedures and in the performance of its specific tasks, to the philosophies which have been developed through the ages' (art. 64). Working out how this is to be done is, according to the encyclical, a matter of recognising a two-fold

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01721.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

task of theology—theology as *auditus fidei* and theology as *intellectus fidei*. The first, the *auditus fidei*, is that movement of the mind in which theology 'makes its own the content of Revelation as this has been gradually expounded in Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Church's living Magisterium' (art. 65). The second task, that of the *intellectus fidei*, is theology responding 'through speculative inquiry to the specific demands of disciplined thought' (ibid.). What is very striking in this treatment of the nature of theology is its very slender, indeed almost casual, treatment of the *auditus fidei*. We are given the sense that it is the pretty straightforward matter of mastering the sources, so that theology has the data on the basis of which it can proceed to its much more interesting and intellectually demanding task of speculation. What is forfeited here, we note, is *exegesis* as an enduring theological task—the exegesis of the biblical texts, and, dependently, of the canon of Christian commentary and argument on those texts. Is this, perhaps, because the encyclical falls into line with a modern convention—namely, that the texts of a community cannot pretend to make ultimate truth claims until they have been translated into general theory? Is it, perhaps, another example of the modern embarrassment about texts as bearers of final truth, which leads us to want to keep making the hermeneutical move from the crudities of *Vorstellung* to the better grounded and more universal *Begriff*? It is noteworthy that the sub-disciplines of theology that are mentioned in the account of the *intellectus fidei* are dogmatics, fundamental theology and moral theology; exegesis, the constantly renewed engagement with the Christian community's primary store of language and ideas, is not mentioned. And, in the account of dogmatics, foundations and morals, clear priority is accorded to the speculative. Thus, we read, dogmatic theology 'must be able to articulate the universal meaning of the mystery of the One and Triune God and of the economy of salvation, both as a narrative and, *above all* [my italics], in the form of argument. It must do so, in other words, through concepts formulated in a critical and universally communicable way' (art. 66). And, so the argument goes, to do this part of its job, theology requires philosophy.

This seems to me a very troubling way of handling the relation of philosophy and theology, for a couple of reasons. One is that if we have learned anything from the history of Christian theology in modernity it is surely that the transposition of the contents of Christian teaching out of narrative, doxology, polemic and paraenesis into arguments, and the search for critical and universally communicable concepts, are not innocent matters. These processes almost inevitably involve putting Christian teaching under severe strain, and often threaten to replace aspects of Christian teaching with something which is more amenable to

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01721.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

the process of speculative reconstruction. One need look no further than the Christian doctrine of creation to see how transposing that doctrine out of the narrative-specific language of divine action into the more philosophically sophisticated language of causality in the end sowed the seeds of the doctrine's decline into marginality and, indeed, virtual unintelligibility. This leads to my second, closely related, worry. The exegetical task of portraying the Christian faith—theology as *auditus fidei*—cannot be thought of as merely a sort of preliminary to the real work of speculation; it is itself to be constitutive of the solution to speculative problems. It would not be impossible to read the history of Christian theology since the early modern period as a failed attempt to propose speculative grounds for Christian beliefs without invoking the content of those beliefs themselves—so that, for example, trinitarian and incarnational doctrine have rarely been thought to have much bearing on questions of the existence of God. I wonder if there is not a danger of that history repeating itself a little here—at least in so far as the descriptive task of theology seems, as it were, to be something behind us, the results of which can be safely tucked away in the bank, whereupon philosophy comes quietly to assume tasks that ought properly to be performed by exegesis. One telling example in the encyclical is the seemingly innocent statement that 'moral theology requires a sound philosophical vision of human nature and society, as well as of the general principles of ethical decision-making' (art. 68). That ethics needs such a description is beyond dispute, unless we favour some sort of voluntarism; but is it really only *philosophy* that can provide such a description? Is it not, in the end, the exegete's (and therefore the dogmatician's) job to furnish such an account?

At this point, we reach article 69, where the argument looks back on itself and faces potential objections. Should not theology today be more interested in history and the sciences than in philosophy? Can we say that the church's philosophical heritage has universal value? Should we not draw more from the wisdom of the various cultures of the world? This last objection does give the encyclical pause to think, and articles 70 and 71 are given over to pondering it. The argument goes roughly like this. From its inception, Christianity has faced the tension between the universality of its message and the reality of cultural diversity. However, cultural diversity is a diversity around a fundamental constant, that constant being that all cultures are expressions of the dynamic of openness to the transcendent, which, as we have already seen, is basic to how the encyclical views both anthropology and philosophy: 'When they are deeply rooted in experience, cultures show forth the human being's characteristic openness to the universal and the transcendent' (art. 70).

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01721.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cultures are thus historical processes of openness: 'they survive and flourish only in so far as they remain open to assimilating new experiences' (art. 71), since at their heart is that which is distinctively human, namely 'unfailing openness to mystery and ... boundless desire to know' (ibid.). This impulse is, theologically interpreted, 'an intrinsic capacity to receive divine Revelation' (ibid.). The example given in the encyclical is that of Indian culture, described thus: 'A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value' (art. 72). India thus exemplifies 'the universality of the human spirit, whose basic needs are the same in the most disparate cultures' (ibid.).

What is to be said here? First, it is not easy to maintain this kind of account of cultural systems; as a bit of cultural ethnography, it's pretty clumsy stuff, especially its basic idea that a culture is, in essence, experience plus metaphysics—a woefully inward account of culture which is difficult to maintain if one thinks of cultures as sets of practices, fields of negotiation of cultural capital, and so on. And, moreover, it seems entirely unaware of the charge of postcolonial theory that 'other' cultures are as much political constructs as anything else. But, even more importantly, it seems rather more even-tempered than we may wish. There's very little about judgment: one or two words about discernment and the need to chasten closed cultures (see art. 72), but not much about culture as a field of wickedness. Like most theology which takes its rise in some form or other of transcendental anthropology, the encyclical is rather sanguine about the potential of humanity, individual or culturally collective; and crisis, the eschatological disruption of culture, seems almost unimaginable on these terms.

Having staked out its claims on these matters, the rest of the chapter is given over to a statement of the basic character of the relationship of theology and philosophy. It is, at least on my reading, a bit dull and a bit of a muddle, and anyone looking for a really magisterial treatment of the issues will have to look elsewhere. The problems begin with article 73, which gets into a fearful tangle of metaphors of movement, all of them intended as an exposition of the proposition that 'the relationship between theology and philosophy is best construed as a circle' (ibid.). Theology has its 'source and starting-point' (ibid.) in God's word, and has the goal of understanding that word. But God's word is Truth, and, therefore, 'the human search for truth — philosophy, pursued in keeping with its own rules — can only help to understand God's word better' (ibid.). (In parenthesis, one can only be alarmed at the neat and exegetically somewhat bizarre dovetailing of the Johannine *aletheia* and philosophical

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01721.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

truth.) But then all the directions get in a knot: the search for truth 'moves from the word of God towards a better understanding of it' (ibid.); but reason also moves between the twin poles of God's word and the understanding of it; and, if that were not enough, reason 'explores new paths' in encountering theology (ibid.) and also 'discovers new and unexpected horizons' (ibid.). So, we have a circle, a movement from a to b, an elliptical motion, a path and a move to an horizon. I suppose it could be postmodern geography, the triumph of spatial indeterminacy; but to me, at least, it just seems like good old pre-modern confusion. And it offers almost no clarification of just what the relation of theology and philosophy is, beyond securing that there is a relation which needs to be taken very seriously.

Things don't fare much better in article 74, which gives a roll-call of those who have got it right, starting with Augustine and ending with Lossky (with no one between Aquinas and Newman). But then with article 75, clarity (if not, for this reader at least, agreement) returns. We are given two different stances in the relation of faith and philosophy. The first, 'philosophy completely independent of the Gospel's Revelation' (ibid.), only goes wrong when proper philosophical autonomy is misread as self-sufficiency, and philosophers forget that '[a]s a search for truth within the natural order, the enterprise of philosophy is always open—at least implicitly—to the supernatural' (ibid.). The second stance, called 'Christian philosophy', is what is described as 'a Christian way of philosophizing, a philosophical speculation in dynamic union with faith' (art. 76). The result of that union is two-fold. On the one hand, 'faith purifies reason' by preventing its fall into presumption. On the other hand, revelation sets before philosophy topics for philosophical analysis which would not otherwise be contemplated. Indeed, we are informed, 'a good deal of modern and contemporary philosophy would not exist without the stimulus of the word of God' (ibid.). But, if philosophy is enriched by theology, theology for its part needs the assistance of its erstwhile *ancilla*, for three reasons. One, 'theology presupposes and requires in all its research a reason formed and educated to concept and argument' (art. 77)—though why only *philosophy* can provide that is not stated. Two, 'theology needs philosophy as a partner in dialogue in order to confirm the intelligibility and universal truth of its claims' (ibid.)—hardly an Anselmian claim, but one to which the generally foundationalist drift of the encyclical is clearly committed. Three, theology needs to be alert to philosophy if it wants to do its philosophy in a self-aware rather than unwitting manner. The authentic model for all this, as article 78 outlines it, is Aquinas, though the precise force of the claim is not easy to feel because the claim is stated without any defence. And the chapter closes with an

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01721.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

account of what requirements theology makes of philosophy if it is to be serviceable: it must, very simply, be 'consonant with the word of God' (art. 79). And, with that, this rather mixed bag of a chapter draws to a close.

One way of getting some purchase on any proposal about the relation of theology to one of its neighbouring fields of inquiry is to look at what doctrines are fielded (or not fielded) in the course of the argument, and what tasks they are asked to perform. The primary doctrinal motif in the chapter is that of the human person as self-transcendent, for that process of moving beyond oneself is itself an openness to the divine self-manifestation in saving history. To this, one might justifiably reply that a concentration on anthropology is at best imprudent in the current climate, and, at worst, potentially disruptive of the shape of Christian doctrine. What the chapter lacks more than anything else is a strong and operative doctrine of the Trinity, and an account of the union of humanity with Christ and of the Holy Spirit. Both these tracts of dogmatic material could serve to underpin the chapter's desire to link the human search for wisdom to some feature of human nature, but without sustaining the negative effects of articulating that search through anthropology. Such doctrine may be implicit, but, if so, one has to ask whether keeping it in the background is a tactical blunder likely to sponsor misunderstandings and misalignments.

Something of a similar fate attends the doctrine of sin, which is rarely spoken of, and then in terms of the 'inherent weakness of human reason' (art. 75) rather than in terms of depravity, idolatry, fantasy or madness (in the way that, for instance, the Christian humanist Calvin treated the depravity of reason). Here the chapter simply extends the more general exegetical weakness of the encyclical as a whole. In the discussion of wisdom literature in chapter 2 (arts. 16–21) this is especially apparent, refusing as it does to admit of any opposition between Israel's wisdom and the treasures of common culture. The contrast of Proverbs 16.9 ('A man's mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps') is turned into divine wisdom as the completion of a natural movement of the creature; and it is very difficult to give assent to the discussion of I Corinthians 1 in article 23. The argument of Paul's onslaught on worldly wisdom is paraphrased thus: 'Of itself, philosophy is able to recognize the human being's ceaselessly self-transcendent orientation towards the truth; and, with the assistance of faith, it is capable of accepting the "foolishness" of the Cross as the authentic critique of those who delude themselves that they possess the truth. The preaching of Christ crucified and risen is the reef upon which the link between faith and philosophy can founder, but it is also the reef beyond which the two can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth'

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01721.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

(art. 23). To which complacency, exegetical and dogmatic good sense simply require that we say a quiet 'No.'

Beyond these issues in dogmatics, we might also ask again whether the encyclical is not a curiously *modern* document. That is, are we to place the letter on a trajectory in which humane philosophy still finds its context in an account of being which is primarily depicted through the language of Scripture and church doctrine? Or are we to place it on a more modern trajectory, in which giving an account of being is actually an autonomous philosophical task which then needs somehow to be co-ordinated with theology? There is real ambivalence in the document on this score. In one sense, philosophy is firmly subservient to the Christian Revelation in which it finds its search for truth completed. In another sense, there are fragments and more than fragments of modernity scattered throughout the argument. Thus the autonomy of philosophy is insisted on at a number of points—and not only to soften the impression of magisterial interventionism, but as an intrinsic part of the argument. At other points, philosophy seems to be accorded a foundational role (e.g., arts. 67, 77), offering better, more secure, accounts of the grounds of faith than faith and its theology are themselves able to furnish. Above all, doctrine comes rather close at a number of points to surrendering to philosophy tasks which it really ought to be busy about itself. All these are conspicuously modern features, and what they cry out for more than anything else is a much more nuanced historical account of the relation of theology and philosophy than the encyclical offers, one which patiently traces the complexities of that relation and, in particular, the decline of the invocation of doctrine in solving problems in philosophical theology

Lastly, we might want to ask whether all is well with the understanding of theology which the encyclical presents. The *intellectus fidei* is described as the process of arranging the saving meaning of the propositions of divine Truth in such a way that 'the believer comes to know the history of salvation' (art. 66). But this is theology without terror, theology without the deep suspicion of arranging the truth about God. No theology should ever dare to be positive unless it is also, at the same time, deeply conscious of its own impossibility. And that is why it may be that the *really* important discussion on which we need the guidance of our bishops is not theology in relation to philosophy, but theology in relation to prayer and the Spirit-produced life of holiness. Discussion of such matters, I think, would produce something far more devastating than the text before us, and might well lead us back into some forgotten bits of the Christian tradition which could turn out to be exactly what we need.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01721.x Published online by Cambridge University Press