

ESSAY #1

During the second millennium of Christianity universities were born where different disciplines, in addition to theology and philosophy, were taught. In these centers of education, as more and more men dedicated themselves to study, currents of thought were analyzed and new perspectives were born. Humanity started to accumulate a growing understanding around faith and reason, which at times proved to be conflicting each other. This essay will treat how Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant, the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* and John Paul II in his encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* relate faith and reason and at the same time the essay assesses how the relationship of faith and reason changes from High Scholasticism to the 20th century.

Ulrich Leinsle sees the scholasticism as a time when theologians were forced to accept the philosophy of Aristotle since “only the proof of the strictly scientific character of theology could secure its place at the university.”¹ Some local churches banned Aristotle’s works and similar material on their universities.² It was Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas who presented Aristotelian philosophy as a major means for theology.³

In the 13th century Thomas Aquinas argued it was useful to have God’s inspired knowledge in addition to philosophical science (I, 1, 1, On the contrary).⁴ Aquinas had very clear the end of man is God who “surpasses the grasp of his reason.”⁵ Therefore, in his *Summa Theologica* he defended the study of the philosophical sciences constructed up by human rationale were not enough for man’s salvation. Since approaching God’s knowledge on this basis would work only for a few and produce many errors.⁶ Even more, Aquinas argued, “faith perfects the intellect”⁷ which is used to study all the other sciences

¹ Ulrich G. Leinsle, *Theology as a Science at the University*. Catholic University of America Press, p. 131.

² *Ibid*, 144-146.

³ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity Volume II the Reformation to the Present Day*. Harper One. New York, NY. 2010, p. 22.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2nd, rev. ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920; New Advent, 2008): I, Q.1, Art.1, On the contrary. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1001.htm>

⁵ *Ibid*, I, 1, 1, I answer that.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ *Ibid*, I, 1, 3, Reply to Obj.1.

besides the divine science. Nevertheless, the autonomy study of theology and philosophical sciences from this period onwards produced some rationalist thinkers whose radical positions contributed to antagonism between reason and faith.⁸

Consequently, in the 16th century for Luther, reason remained a “dangerous thing, especially when it intervenes in spiritual matters.”⁹ Luther’s *Sola Scriptura* and its relation to experience distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel, the spirit and the letter had its effects on the theological interpretations of the reformers.

In the 17th century a group of English philosopher-theologians known as the “Cambridge Platonists” based their religion on reason; this group influenced Isaac Newton for whom only a God “very well skilled in mechanics and geometry” could explain the continuing order of the solar system. For the people in general, the scientific discoveries of their age gave additional proof of the existence of God.¹⁰ Around that time, Descartes, with his Cartesian rationalism, proposed a philosophy grounded in mathematical reasoning and universal doubt, to theologians. Some saw it as a promise of a renewal regarding spirit and matter (soul and body), even though the relationship between the two was not clear. However, “the theological faculties of several universities declared that Aristotelianism was the philosophical system best suited to Christian theology.”¹¹ Before the end of the century, another proposal arose with the work of John Locke, empiricism. For him, knowledge came from either experience or probability. In probability, the strict proofs of reason do not apply, instead those of judgement. “Faith is assent to knowledge that is derived from revelation rather from reason. Therefore,

⁸ John Paul II. “Fides et Ratio.” The Holy See, 14 Sept. 1998, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html

⁹ Ulrich G. Leinsle, *Introduction to Scholastic Theology*. Catholic University of America Press, p. 258.

¹⁰ William C. Placher and Derek Nelson, *A History of Christian Theology*, Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, KY. 2013, 205.

¹¹ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity Volume II. The Reformation to the Present Day*. Harper One. New York, NY. 2010, p. 238.

its knowledge, although highly probable, is never certain. Reason and judgement must be used to measure the degree of probability of what we are asked to believe by faith.”¹²

In the 18th century many of the assumptions of the age of reason were coming into question¹³ with figures like Hume who was “very pessimist when it came to the powers of reason”¹⁴ due to the limitation of observation and reason, proposing instead the study of substance and cause and effect. The works of Hume awaken Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher with a Pietism background. He imagined a religion independent of the historical Jesus because he judged some beliefs as superstitious and fake conversions on those under the pressure of their religion. Therefore, his emphasis was on virtue, living ethically and morally with no concerns for the consequences. Kant rejected cults and rituals usually associated with religion because these practices “distract people from their moral duty.”¹⁵ Kant’s philosophy introduced the structures of the mind as a vehicle to acquire knowledge, which is according to our own mind abilities, not objective knowledge of the things. This “meant that many of the arguments traditionally used in support of Christian doctrine were no longer valid,”¹⁶ like the existence of God or of the soul. It was not a denial of them but the proof that “reason cannot know them just as the eye cannot hear and the ear cannot see.”¹⁷ Kant rejected to “take the powers of reason for granted, and the first to conduct a critique of reason itself.”¹⁸

In the 19th century, Catholics wanted to respond to the struggle between modernity and tradition on the fields of faith and reason like the priest Georg Hermes “who sought to reconcile Catholic theology with Kant’s critical philosophy. Hermes was posthumously condemned in 1835.”¹⁹ The official catholic response was the Neothomism, a papally supported form of Thomism and the Constitution *Dei*

¹² Ibid, 241.

¹³ Ibid, 217.

¹⁴ Ibid, 242.

¹⁵ William C. Placher and Derek Nelson, *A History of Christian Theology*, Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, KY. 2013, 216.

¹⁶ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity Volume II. The Reformation to the Present Day*. Harper One. New York, NY. 2010, p. 247.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Diogenes Allen and Erick O. Springsted. *Philosophy For Understanding Theology*. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, London. 1985, p. 9.

¹⁹ Bernard McGinn, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae*. Princeton University Press, p. 165.

Filius of the First Vatican Council, which defined the relationship between faith and reason consistent with Thomas's view contained in the *Summa*.²⁰

On chapter 2 in the name of the Church, *Dei Filius* "teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certitude by the natural light of human reason from created things." Later, on chapter 3 states "we are bound by faith to give full obedience of intellect and will to God who reveals" not because of the perception of reason but because of belief in God. However, in addition to the Holy Spirit working internally on us, suited to the intelligence of all, there are miracles and prophecies serving as proofs of revelation, which are "consonant with reason". Regarding faith and reason, *Dei Filius*, maintains that knowledge is twofold: in principle and in object."(1) in principle, indeed, because we know in one way by natural reason, in another by divine faith; (2) in object, however, because, in addition to things to which natural reason can attain, mysteries hidden in God are proposed to us for belief which, had they not been divinely revealed, could not become known." The reasoning behind that is that divine mysteries surpass the intellect; even with faith, they continue obscured in this mortal life.²¹

All previous developments related to faith and reason throughout the centuries facilitated the work presented by John Paul II at the end of the 20th century in his encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*. JP II is not afraid of modern philosophy, he knows the knowledge proper to faith does not annihilate the mystery but reveals it more (13). He opens his letter declaring, "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth." Faith helps us to penetrate the divine mysteries so we can understand them coherently. Signs presented by Revelation then aid reason. These signs urge reason to look beyond to

²⁰ Ibid, 167.

²¹ Norman P. Tanner, S.J. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Volume Two. Trent to Vatican II*. Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC. 1990, pp. 806-808.

grasp their deeper meaning (13). *Fides et Ratio* does not line up with a particular philosophy because the Church must be oriented to truth while philosophies are governed by reason. But alerts Bishops and the Magisterium to discern how these philosophies are compatible with Revelation; a ministry that has become more urgent considering the proliferation of philosophical offerings and theological temptations of our times, some of which are rooted in the past (49-52). JP II urges all philosophers to trust in the power of human reason, and not to abandon the passion for ultimate truth. Faith moves reason beyond, for JP II faith “becomes the convinced and convincing advocate for reason” (56). There is a profound compatibility between faith and reason; faith is able “to show fully the path to reason in a sincere search for the truth” (68). The Pope concludes emphasizing the value of philosophy for the understanding of the faith; convinced that faith and reason mutually support and influence each other; having both “contributed richly to the progress of humanity” (101), proposes both should recover their true relationship as the human family readies to enter the third millennium.

While the second millennium saw the birth of theology as a science, theology learned to remain faithful to its vocation of study God’s revelation to light with its interpretations the faith of men and women of every age. Since revelation comes from God and knowing the Holy Spirit guided her, theology was not afraid of the challenges the increased use of reason brought. Because human reason is given by God, it will continue developing until we are ready to be transformed to reign with Christ on his second coming. In the meantime, let us give thanks to the Lord for the great theologians and philosophers, Christian or not, who generously responded to the call of using their faith and/or reason in the pursuit of knowledge and offered it to serve humanity.