

Faith, Reason and Imagination: the Study of Theology and Philosophy in the 21st Century

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I

The social and cultural context for the study of theology is changing drastically.

Traditionally theology has been studied as a vocational discipline, subsequent to the undertaking of other studies, in different fields. Characteristically, this has encouraged the view that one undertakes first of all secular studies, guided by the light of reason, before turning one's mind to the higher matter of reflection upon revelation. A corollary of this is that one first of all deals with what is ultimately the classical (Greek and Roman) legacy before turning one's mind to the Biblical (substantially Judaic) inheritance.

This pattern then accords with a fundamentally dualistic and hierarchic division of Christian culture between the horizons of Athens and Jerusalem. This division has good aspects (as I shall presently suggest) as well as more questionable ones. At any rate, it contrasts with the educational legacy of both Judaism and Islam, wherein the entire course of learning is more fundamentally guided by hermeneutic engagement with sacred and legal texts. The much increased presence of Islamic culture in Europe therefore presents a challenge to the traditional Christian pedagogic arrangements. On

the one hand, it may well be important (see below) to sustain our commitment to humanistic learning; on the other hand the Islamic presence throws a stark light upon the general absence of the Biblical legacy within the general run of Western culture. This is by no means simply the result of secularisation. On the contrary, it is the result of the specifically Western (not Eastern, at least in origin) conception of the nature of *laïcité*. Because the laity have generally been somewhat excluded from the affairs of the Church, the spheres of secular politics and reasoning, founded often upon the classical legacy, have been seen as their 'proper' domain.

However, a socially-induced new pattern of theological study provides us with the opportunity to re-think this model. Increasingly, theology is studied not as a postscript to the humanities, but rather as itself a humanistic discipline. Here the issue of theology versus the objective study of religion is proving to be, within Anglo-Saxon countries at least, something of a side-issue. In practice, departments combining both have emerged and the course of a student's study tends naturally to oscillate between a relatively detached view of religious history, belief and practice on the one hand, and attempts intellectually to develop faith perspectives (whether Christian or otherwise, though Christian perspectives normally predominate) on the other.

More important than this division is surely the newly 'humanistic' approach to the combined study of theology and religions. By this I mean, first of all, that theology is now often undertaken as a first undergraduate Arts degree. Secondly, I mean that 'systematic' approaches to its study based upon presumed philosophical 'foundations' have largely been replaced, within the Anglo-Saxon world, by more eclectic textual and historical study, which includes also attention to literary and artistic religious

works. This study certainly builds up to a speculative engagement, but the elaboration of systems according to a method from clear foundational starting points has largely been abandoned. If such an approach was, perhaps, always alien to the Anglo-Saxon mentality, it can also be argued that it was in any case specifically modern and that the newer approach tends to re-work in a 'postmodern' way something of the premodern, more piecemeal and commentary-orientated approach to doing theology.

So theology is now predominantly studied as a first humanities degree by students of both sexes who are generally not destined for the Priesthood, nor even for academic careers.

Far from this suggesting straightforwardly a secularisation of the discipline, it rather suggests its 'laicisation', and even a certain popular will amongst younger people to achieve a more religiously informed culture at large, besides a Christian culture wherein reason and politics are guided by the Biblical as well as the classical legacy. This overcoming of an inherited Athens/Jerusalem duality can be achieved without abandoning that valuation of Greek and Roman literary classics which is peculiar to Christianity and which, I think, relates to the validation of the 'human as such' by the doctrine of the Incarnation. It is in fact the case that the more Judaism and Islam are exposed to a secular literary culture, the more they have, implicitly (and usually without knowing it) embarked upon an engagement with the Christian legacy also.

Yet if Judaism and Islam can learn from Christianity the value of relatively independent humanities (since the human as such is latently imbued with the sacred), then inversely Christianity can perhaps learn from the other two monotheisms the

importance of a more integrated culture. All the same, in Christian terms this implies a Biblical culture that gives far more place than is traditional for either the Jewish or the Islamic mainstream to both the philosophical and the secular literary legacies. What is required now in the West is a more developed Christian humanism, which, as Pope Benedict has suggested, would allow for a still greater mingling of faith with reason.

This mingling has always been part of the Christian genius, for while Islam later re-discovered philosophical reason, it was never able to integrate this within the dominant tradition which remained largely fideistic, so ensuring that philosophy in reaction saw itself as the esoteric preserve of those with superior insight. For the Christian notion of *doctrina* by contrast, an integration of philosophical reflection with Biblical interpretation was crucial from the outset. And in addition, the typological approach to the partial truth of the Old Testament provided a model which was readily extended to other literatures and cultural practices. This is partly why the universalist thrust of Christianity is more extreme than that of Judaism and Islam, besides being more complex. For on the one hand, the final revelation of God as Man suggests that the traces of truth are found everywhere within the *humanum*. On the other hand, it suggests that humanity can only be re-united through the common recognition of this one man, Christ, as the concrete event, beyond all laws and prescriptions, of the arrival of fully restored human truth.

For all the above reasons it seems to me that what is now required, in an age when religion has re-asserted itself within the public realm, is a new sort of Christianised *Litterae Humaniores*, to be undertaken either at undergraduate or at Master's

postgraduate level, such as is being developed within the Centre of Theology and Philosophy at the University of Nottingham (at Master's Level).

The three major components of this would be theology, philosophy and literature, assuming that theology would comprise also Biblical criticism and Church history and therefore be inevitably engaged in addition with the entire question of history as such. Literature should form the third component, because both theology and philosophy also exist in poetic and narrative modes of representation, while since the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment these have often proved to be the most important idioms for the defence and development of Orthodox doctrine. Since textual study properly predominates in the academy, and because literature tends to mediate between concept and image, the literary mode of artistic representation should assume pre-eminence within this re-conceived syllabus, although this by no means implies the exclusion of a theological and philosophical consideration of music and the visual arts.

II

But the core of this new syllabus, or 'the Nottingham model', is theology *and* philosophy. This deliberately loose conjunction 'and' is crucial. For one is no longer talking about 'philosophy of religion', nor even about 'philosophical theology'. The former is a legacy of German idealist thought and tends to suggest that philosophy, beyond doctrinal theology, can tell us the final truth about religion or offer a critical commentary upon it, from an alleged superior vantage-point. But this begs the question about the degree to which the invocation of a Creator God must transform

one's understanding of the entire natural order, and also the degree to which the acknowledgment of a historical revelation must revise even that understanding.

It is nonetheless clearly the case that a great deal is to be learnt both from idealist philosophy of religion, especially insofar as it insisted on the speculative value of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation after these had been reduced to mere positive data by professional theology. There is also much to be learned from more recent phenomenological theses in Continental philosophy about the foundational character of 'donation', as well as from phenomenological readings of the Bible. However the question arises in all these instances as to how far an interpretative bias rooted in a particular theological tradition is smuggled into a supposedly philosophically objective account. Has the boundary with theology not already been covertly transgressed, and if so should not this trespass be confessed and then theoretically re-legitimised?¹

As to 'philosophical theology', it is a wholly redundant term: all Christian *doctrina* is involved in discursive reflection which appeals to traditions of philosophical reflection. Conversely, the more 'philosophical' aspects of theology, such as reasoning to God's existence, the so-called problem of evil, the divine attributes and the nature of talk about God, are every bit as much a matter of 'doctrine' that interprets revelatory events as are such topics as sin, grace, redemption, incarnation and the Trinity.

¹ See, for example, Dominique Janicaud et al, *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn': the French Debate*, trans Bernard G. Prusak (New York: Fordham UP 2000)

Where this is forgotten, as in recent manifestations of the ‘analytic philosophy of religion’ in the writings of Richard Swinburne, Thomas V. Morris et al. then theological approaches to these matters tend to be mis-described in ontotheological terms which treat God as simply a ‘supreme being’ and the consequent discussions of supposed Christian theses are, as a result, as worthless as would be the discussions of the belief-systems of an imaginary tribe.²

Within analytic approaches the exception to this tendency has been the Wittgensteinian approach to religion which, to the contrary, tends to emphasise that a religion has its own unique form of linguistic coherence and standards as to what can count as true. By comparison with the dire general run of analytic approaches to religion this is highly salutary and valuable. The problem, however, with this approach, is a result of the general problem of Wittgenstein’s linguistified Kantianism and finitism, which tends to regard the grammatical rules of religious, as of other discourses (however obscure these may be), as marking out transcendental bounds for correct reasoning which cannot be speculatively transgressed. This scheme suppresses the fact that, since no such boundaries can be clearly identified without a contradictory crossing over to their other side, all human discourses have to cope with *aporias* that arise from the irreducibly indeterminable nature of things with which human beings are confronted and which a *really* rigorous linguistic analysis -- as has been shown all the way from Plato to Derrida – tends to augment rather than to reduce.³

² See, for example, Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: OUP 1977); Thomas V. Morris *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP 1986)

³ See Conor Cunningham’s decisive essay, ‘:Language: Wittgenstein after Theology’ in J.Milbank, C.Pickstock and G.Ward eds *Radical Orthodoxy: a New Theology* (London: Routledge 1999) 64-90

Wittgenstein's still Lockean view (rooted ultimately in his mathematically dubious mathematical finitism), that metaphysical conundra will evaporate once we clarify verbal usage, however plural and mysterious he later allowed this to be, seems by comparison somewhat shallow, and only to apply to relatively banal instances. In the case of religion it is, by contrast, clear that ritual practices not only confront the sublime margins of the meaningful, but also already attempt to reckon with and resolve the irresolvable -- and yet linguistically and culturally unavoidable -- problems of the relation of the invisible to the visible and the absolute to the relative -- as many ethnographical analyses, for example those of Lévi-Strauss, have shown. Accordingly, theological speculation sustains at a more reflective level what is implicit in pre-reflective religious practice and is not a redundant misunderstanding of religious language games, as Wittgenstein and some of his followers like D.Z Phillips have tended to imply. A more useful application of Wittgenstein is that of Fergus Kerr OP who has pointed out how Wittgenstein saw human religiosity as irreducible because rooted in our specifically human mode of animality.⁴

But by contrast with both 'philosophy of religion' and 'philosophical theology', the point of 'theology *and* philosophy' is that the Nottingham model is concerned with the entirety of philosophy, not just its 'application' to religion or theology. This is because theology claims to speak about everything in relation to God, which is to say being as such and all of the fundamental modes of being, besides those decisive historical events of divine revelation which are held to re-construe our very interpretation of the ontological. Yet 'philosophy' is first of all the name of the discourse which reflects upon being and the ways in which things can be (according

⁴ Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986)

to Aristotle). The secondary aspects of philosophy – namely the ways in which being is apparent (phenomenology) and can be known and spoken about (logic and grammar) as well as acted upon (ethics) follow from this understanding of first philosophy as ontology or metaphysics. In this way theology remains always concerned with philosophy, even if it transfigures it.

This concern with philosophy in its entirety does not mean, however, that philosophy straightforwardly provides a foundation upon which theology builds. One could even say that the latter model at once accords too much autonomy to philosophy and too much superiority to theology.

The notion of philosophy as foundational and autonomous is too ahistorical. In practice this usually means that Christian theology becomes subservient to the dominant philosophy of the day, as still usually prevails. The problem here is that these philosophies frequently turn out to be not at all theologically neutral, for example in their conception of the relation of God to being, or of the nature of language and human understanding.

And the fundamental reason for this is that an entity called ‘philosophy’ has never, as a matter of fact, really existed in pure independence from religion or theology. One can even go further to claim that the idea of a sheerly autonomous philosophy is twice over the historical invention of certain modes of theology itself. In the first place, as Pierre Hadot and others have shown, Greek philosophy was always a mode of spiritual practice and never an ‘interest free’ enquiry involving a ‘view from nowhere’. Paradoxically, it might seem, it was only when Jews, Muslims and then

Christians re-discovered aspects of Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle and certain fragments of neoplatonism, that they projected back onto antiquity a purely 'rational' enquiry that was somewhat of their own invention. This was because antique philosophy could be viewed as at least problematically legitimate if it was taken as the work of human reason, but not if it was taken as linked to pagan religious reflection. In this way a category of 'pure reason' started to come into being only as the shadow of the notion of 'faith'.

In many ways this re-discovery of antique thought disturbed an older Christian model for the integration of philosophy within Christian doctrine. In the case of the Greek Fathers and of Augustine, little distinction was made between *philosophia Christiana*, 'doctrine' and 'theology'. Truth was seen as one and revelation as the restoration of a fullness of truth, insofar as this is accessible for finitude, to fallen human beings. In Aquinas certainly, in the wake of Maimonides, Ibn-Sina and Ibn-Rushd, there is apparently a much greater distinction made between philosophy, including its rational mode of doing theology, and *sacra doctrina* which reflects upon revelation. But to regard this apparently clear distinction as simply a gain, with time, of a greater clear-sightedness about the distinction, is surely naïve. For the new distinction rather reflects the challenge posed by Aristotelianism as a philosophy seemingly true according to reason, and yet less easily assimilable with the conclusions of faith than an earlier Platonic mode of thinking. Often, of course, this circumstance gave rise to various modes of a 'double truth' doctrine; later it helped to encourage a new mode of theologico-philosophical reflection which not only dared to criticise Aristotle, but also the entire Greek philosophical legacy, by vastly extending the scope of logical possibility: I am thinking, of course, of Scotus and then of the nominalists. However,

in the case of Aquinas, the new circumstance rather encouraged him to show how basically Aristotelian reasons, when properly considered, themselves supported the conclusions of faith.

However, Aquinas was only here successful because he was able to show that the implications of Christian doctrine were more 'materialist' than had hitherto been supposed. The material creation was not only good, its material character was also for us vital in assisting the processes of mental deliberation, reasoning to God and the bringing about of our salvation. Even if most certainly Aristotle assisted him in making these conclusions bolder, they are nonetheless supported both by a more accurate reading of Augustine than that provided by more spiritualist and dualistic interpretations, and by deployment of the Proclean strand of neoplatonism (mediated in part by Dionysius) which already permitted an integration of a more 'materialist' view within a framework that remained fundamentally emanationist and participatory. The picture Aquinas is always arguing for concerns fundamentally the logic of creation *ex nihilo*, along with the gracious raising of spiritual creatures to a supernatural end that is, nonetheless, paradoxically an integral implication of their spiritual existence as such.

Thus while Aquinas appears to deploy 'purely rational' arguments, the conclusions which he is supporting are always those consistent with faith, like, for example, the diversity and autonomy in different created spirits of the operation of the active intellect, which, against the Arabs, he took to be required in order to sustain both the freedom of spiritual creatures and the ultimate significance of the material distinctness and individuality of human spiritual creatures. Furthermore, Aquinas was not a

modern rationalist: he understood good reason to be an attentive reception, via the mediation of the senses and discursive operations, of the divine light of the *Logos*, in fundamental keeping (despite many scholarly denials) with the view of St Augustine. Finally, for Aquinas, good reason can only be such if implicitly it desires, and therefore mysteriously intimates in advance, that which can only be received as a gift: namely the supernatural light of faith.⁵

In these ways Aquinas effectively restored the Patristic integration of philosophy with theology, albeit he now more distinguished to unite. This is reflected in his pedagogic practice, which rarely shows a strong division between the two modes of discourse but rather tends constantly to shuttle between both. Reason, for him, always has an obscure onlook towards faith, while faith, which is relatively more intuitive, can never, in this life, fully leave behind the discursiveness proper to philosophy.

It follows that, for Aquinas, philosophy is not straightforwardly foundational and neither is theology straightforwardly superior.

Instead theology, whenever it intimates the heights, must humbly return to the depths and forever in time start all over again with the relatively prosaic problems posed by philosophy. Its transcendence of the philosophical perspective is always, for now, merely provisional. Inversely, philosophy offers no secure self-contained foundation, because it always necessarily gestures beyond itself, in accordance with the Augustinian version of the ‘Meno problematic’ which Aquinas several times invokes: we can only seek God who is beyond all reach if in some strange sense we have

⁵ See for this and the entire account of Aquinas here given, John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001)

already arrived at this destination because he has already reached down to us. The scope of this problematic for him embraces both reason and revelation and transcends their division, just as does likewise the entire framework of the participation of beings in Being and of spiritual beings in the divine light, which is in itself one and simple.

It can be argued then, that Aquinas warded off the threat of duality posed by those Islamic philosophers with which he was familiar – even if one should point out that various Sufi figures offered more integrating perspectives. Aquinas even, at times, when assessing the rational opinions of Plato and Aristotle, suggests that one must take account of the pagan character of their thought, though no doubt, with historicist hindsight, he did not do this to anything like a sufficient degree.

For these reasons it is not entirely clear that Aquinas fully accepted the retrospective invention of the rational autonomy of philosophy. However, this autonomy was much more decisively confirmed in a second historical moment. In a gradual process stretching from Scotus to Banez, theology started to conclude that human beings have two separate final ends, a natural and a supernatural one, and that the first remains substantially independent of the former. If previously the notion of a purely rational philosophy was shadowed by a sense of something pagan and unredeemed, now this is seen as an entirely legitimate exercise, within the bounds of ‘pure nature’. A fully autonomous rational philosophy had at last arrived.⁶

Yet the paradox is that the secularising gesture which permitted its arrival was entirely a theological gesture, and even one which sought to conserve the

⁶ See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids Mich: Eerdmans, 2005)

transcendence of God and the priority of the supernatural, by insisting on the sheer ‘naturalness’ and self-sufficiency of human beings without grace, as a backdrop for augmenting grace’s sheer gratuity.

This circumstance then poses a crucial question for theology today. Far from it being the case that theology is necessarily at the mercy of philosophical fashions, theology is now in a position to ask whether the fundamental assumed shape of modern philosophy as such is not the result of now buried past theological decisions?

Decisions which, in theological terms, were highly questionable, if, indeed, not outrightly erroneous. Here the question of the invention of a double human end may itself be embedded in earlier and equally doubtful theological options, which all tended to suggest the comprehensibility of finite being, essences, knowledge and causality entirely in their own terms, without reference to their created and supernatural origin. These were, primarily, the substitution of univocity for analogy in ontology; of mirroring representation for knowledge by identity in epistemology; of the primacy of possibility for the primacy of actuality in modal theory and finally, in the case of the theory of causality, of the ‘concurrence’ of created with divine causality on the same ontological plane for an earlier notion of equally ‘self-sufficient’ finite and infinite causation operating synergically on different ontological levels, with the latter conceived as transcendently all-determining of finite causes in their very independence.⁷

⁷ See for this and much of the following, Olivier Boulnois, *Être et représentation: une généalogie de la métaphysique moderne à l’époque de Duns Scot* (Paris: PUF 1999); Frédéric Nef, *Qu’est-ce que la métaphysique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004) 314-415; Jacob Schmutz, ‘La doctrine médiévale des causes et la théologie de la nature pure’ in *Revue Thomiste* Jan-June 2001, special issue *Surnaturel*, 217-264; Catherine Pickstock, ‘Duns Scotus: his historical and contemporary significance’ in *Modern Theology* Vol 21 No 4 October 2005, 543-575; John Milbank, ‘The Thomistic Telescope: Truth and Identity’ in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 193-227; David Burrell, ‘Aquinas and Scotus: contrary patterns for Philosophical Theology’ in *Faith and Freedom: an Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 91-113

In all four cases one has a new set of philosophical theses which dictate the entire consequent course of modern philosophy. But in all four cases also, it is arguable that the most fundamental reasons for the adoption of these theses were theological. As regards univocity, Avicenna and later Scotus were concerned not just with logic but with the security of the proof for God's existence which, in order to be fully apodeictic, can be held to require a stable middle term. Scotus was in addition concerned to defend the coherence of predicating terms like 'goodness' of God by insisting upon their core stability of meaning. Finally, he also regarded the idea that being in the abstract rather than materialised being is the natural first object of human understanding as both guaranteeing our spiritual nature, and indicating the difference between a pre-fallen and fallen, sensually debased exercise of intelligence.

As regards representation, the new model was much encouraged by Scotus's view that one can formally distinguish the divine intellect, as representing truth, from the divine being, which enjoys a certain metaphysical primacy. It was equally encouraged, from Scotus through to Ockham, by the view that God, through exercise of his *potentia absoluta*, can sever the normal link between our mind's understanding of things and the way they are in themselves.

In the case of the modal priority of the possible over the actual it is, once again, a matter of stressing the divine *potentia absoluta* as his primary attribute, along with an elevation of the divine will over the divine intellect, as well as, still more significantly, the formal distinction of the two. The latter notion ensures that reasoning, sundered from the erotic, will be more and more thought of in terms of the

consideration of an *a priori* repertoire of logical possibilities, while equally willing, sundered from an intrinsic determination by the rationally best, starts to become reduced to an arbitrary choice that precedes any necessities endemic to an order of actuality.

In the case of concurrence, the more divine freedom is construed in univocal and so ontotheological terms as guaranteed by its power to out-compete and trump created freedom, then the more, paradoxically, created freedom is also granted an autonomous space outside divine causation.

Thus it is plausible to argue that the modern philosophical preference for univocity, for representation, for possibility, the sundering of will from intellect and the picture of divine and created causality as being in competition with each other, possesses not fully-acknowledged theological roots. From a Christian point of view, the buried theological stratum of modern thought represents not obviously a progressive advance in Christian reasoning, but is rather thoroughly questionable.

In brief: univocity breaks with the entire legacy of negative theology and eminent attribution, which also undergirds doctrines of deification. It obliterates the sense that creation is through and through a divine gift through its claim that being as such, as opposed to finite being, is not created, since the term 'being' has now become a logically transcendental place-holder that precedes any existentially actual reality. Hence both infinite and finite being are now held to presume the formal possibility 'to

be'.⁸ For Aquinas, by contrast, the divine infinite being is an absolutely unprecedented and mysterious simple actuality that is identical with infinite intelligence, while abstract being in general, *ens commune*, is first of all a created actuality and only thereby a subject of possible becoming or even of fictional speculation.

The theory of knowledge by representation is likewise theologically questionable -- first of all because, in God, since he is simple, intellect cannot 'follow', even metaphysically, upon being. Secondly, because the harmonious continuity between the way things exist in matter and the way they exist in our mind embodies a certain pan-sacramental order that is part of the divine government of the world, reflecting the divine reason as such, and therefore not liable to be interrupted by even a divine whim. Thirdly, because the theory of knowledge by identity respects the partially spiritual, because integrally formed character of all created things as proceeding from God. Knowledge, from a theological point of view, as Aquinas taught, has the spiritual purpose of raising and enhancing reality; it is not primarily, in its *raison d'être*, a neutral Sherlock Holmes-like capacity for observation and accurate inference.

Meanwhile, the priority of possibility denies the traditional sense that there can be a kind of necessity in actuality as such which is a beautiful, harmonious, grace-imbued good order, recognisable by wise, rightly-ordered judgement. It also tends, in purely philosophical terms, as David Burrell has pointed out, unrealistically to think of choices in terms of pure logical availability, whereas in practice certain initial choices

⁸ See Ludger Honnefelder, *La Métaphysique comme science transcendente* trans Isabelle Mandrella (Paris: PUF 2002)

drastically preclude later ones, whether for pragmatic reasons or for reasons of the formation of a habit.⁹ The same theory finally leaves mysterious the question of what sways any choice: in reality there is no ‘pure will’, but only the persuading of desire by some reason or lure that appears to a subject as more convincing or persuasive.

Finally, the theory of causal concurrence idolatrously reduces divine power to being merely a supremely big instance of the power that we know about, and denies the eminent capacity of divine power fully to determine even created freedom while leaving the latter as free in its own terms and on its own level.

The above set of reflections suggests an initial agenda for the field of ‘theology and philosophy’: a need, in the wake of the writings of recent historians of philosophy which all tend to converge on the same conclusions (some of which I have tried here to summarize), to reflect upon the buried theological origins of modern philosophy and the implications of this both for theology and for our current global culture.

But not just for our culture, also for our entire society. Pope Benedict in his great Ratisbon address and the materialist philosopher Quentin *Meillassoux* in his little book *Après la finitude*, are significantly at one in diagnosing the ideological problem of the 21st C.¹⁰ The philosophy of the 20thC was predicated on the autonomy of pure reason and the impossibility of metaphysical speculation. Latterly, however, we have seen the deconstruction of the attempts even to define the limits of what can properly be known about, whether in the case of Derrida’s critique of Husserl, or Rorty’s consummation of the critique of the analytic enterprise. Conjoined to this is the

⁹ See David Burrell, ‘Al Ghazali on created freedom’ and ‘Creation, will and knowledge in Aquinas and Duns Scotus’ in *Faith and Freedom*, 156-189

¹⁰ Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la Finitude: Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Paris: Seuil, 2006)

collapse of the ideologies of finitude: positivism, Marxism, Freudianism, even Darwinism. But this has left an appalling vacuum. Without metaphysical mediation various modes of fideistic religion were covertly emerging throughout the last century, and now, in the new one, they rush in to fill the cognitive void, because societies cannot exist without some sort of account of what is real and desirable. The only alternatives now to fideism and the growth of arbitrary theocracy of whatever mode are an entirely nihilistic mode of market society on the one hand (which will require increasingly authoritarian policing) or else a return to prominence, as the Pope advocates, of metaphysical discourses capable of mediating between faith and reason. To recover and renew such discourses we need to commence with an understanding of how, in the Islamic and Christian West, reason and faith first became separated from each other.

III

Recovery however, is not enough, because, as Pope Benedict also indicated, modernity is not simply to be rejected. The modern emphases upon strict logical identity, the independence of thought from being, the scope of possibility and freedom, have indeed increased our sense, albeit in a distorted because Promethean or else relativistic fashion, of the primacy of cultural mediation – the way human beings through sign, image and artefact create their own world and are in turn shaped by this world. There is no avoiding this new awareness by longing for the impossible return of a totally fixed, hierarchical social order wherein all knew their place.

On the other hand, as Bruno Latour has pointed out, modernity rests upon one supreme contradiction. *Nature* is supposed to be given and fixed and to run according

to immutable laws, while *culture* is supposed to be entirely mutable and to pursue no pre-assigned ends whatsoever.¹¹ Yet today we realise that there may be nothing fixed about nature and that her supposed ‘laws’ may merely apply to certain regional natural republics within a more fundamental sea of chaos. Moreover, we have discovered that there may be no intrinsic limit to our capacity to transform also the physical world for good or ill. Nature, too, it seems, turns out to be cultural. But on the other hand, if that is the case, then our cultural reality is conversely entirely natural – it exhibits, as it were, on the surface of the earth, a strange fusion of nature’s capacity both for unpredictable fluidity and for the imposition of order.

Once again, in postmodern terms one can read this scenario either nihilistically or theologically. In the latter perspective the question ‘how should we be?’ turns out to make no sense if does not also mean ‘how should the whole of nature be?’, since nature is no more given than culture. On the other hand, the discovery that there is after all no ‘nature’ in the sense of a given order, can lead us back to the view that all finite reality is not ‘nature’ but rather ‘creation’. As created, all things participate in the divine creative power which is at once order-making and yet unpredictable, like the flow of music. Human beings simple command this power more intensely and consciously and this is the valid sense in which they are cultural beings.

A renewed metaphysics should not seek to suppress the primacy of becoming and the event either in nature or culture. It should not recognise divine order in the world despite the flux but through and because of it, albeit in its series of complex and always relatively stable and consistent punctuations. The participation of finite being

¹¹ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* trans Catherine Porter (Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP 2004). See also Michel Serres, *L’Incandescent* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2003)

and intelligence in the godhead needs now to be re-thought in terms of the vital flow of historical becoming which will take account of the way in which, while ontological structures provide the setting for events, the latter can also exceed the import of pre-given structures. This is in fact allowed for by Aquinas's view that *essentia* is actualised by *esse*, but the implication needs much further drawing out.¹² One can say here that the neoplatonic sense of metaphysical genealogy, namely that the 'how' of the way things are must be traced back to the 'why' of their ultimate ontological derivation (whereas for Scotus and his legacy the 'how' of things is complete as a description without advertence to origin)¹³ needs to be infused also with a sense of historicist genealogy, namely that the 'how' of things must also be traced back to their temporal derivation.

The issue then is to understand just how the process of temporal becoming participates in the eternal procession of the creation from the divine Trinity which is itself a kind of eternal and perfected process of emanation and yet equally a process of internal becoming. The Son emanates perfectly from the Father, but the latter 'becomes' Father retrospectively (as it were) only through this perfect imaging. The Spirit then expresses, one could say, the perfect unity of metaphysical origination from the perfect with 'historical' evolution from an origin to further explication (even though, in God, this *explicatio* is perfect eternal *complicatio* which renders the origin replete from the outset).

¹² See Philipp W. Rosemann, *Omne ens est aliquid* (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 1996), for an important attempt to do so.

¹³ On this point see Emmanuel Perrier OP 'Duns Scotus Facing Reality: Between Absolute Contingency and Unquestionable Consistency' in *Modern Theology* Vol 21 No 4 October 2005, 619-643

In this way, one could speculate, creation is atemporally and emanatively given to us always through the eschatological achievement of the new Jerusalem, the perfected heaven and earth, and all our lesser, spoiled historical realities depend for their very existence upon this mediating source. On the other hand, a slow coming to be from Adam, contingently interrupted by the fact of sin and the process of redemption always at work (for even our ontological sustaining), unfolds through time the ‘becoming’ aspect of the Trinitarian life.

A more historicised metaphysics must also give more attention to the role of the imagination. As Aquinas already knew, the latter is for us the threshold between matter and spirit: it is the mysterious alchemical point at which mind, in order to think at all, must produce its own shadowy sensations that must always be ‘returned to’ in order to complete a thought (*conversio ad phantasmata*). Normally we see ‘right through’ these phantasms in order to re-establish contact, via our senses, with the physical world outside us. And yet they are always secretly at work and this is exhibited in the way we not only sense the world and all it includes, but necessarily and ‘fantastically’ sense it ‘as something’. It is just this capacity which renders us consciously historical creatures and one can say that ‘history happens in the primary imagination’, in Coleridgean terms.¹⁴ What makes a historical event an event is precisely the fusion of sensation and thought which imagination, and not reason alone, brings about. And to this is added the work of the secondary imagination when the mind, in the absence of present physical realities, is capable of projecting its shadowy sensations back out into the sensorily perceived world in order to modify it. This gives rise, in the first place, to those fictions that we believe in, those fictions that we

¹⁴ For Samuel Taylor Coleridge on the imagination see his *Biographia Literaria* (London: Everyman, 1965)

inhabit, and which also, along with imaginatively perceived natural realities, help to compose our human history.

And then there are those fictions that we do not inhabit, or not fully, or which we know that we could never inhabit. Pictures of what has never been; symbols of the intrinsically absent and ineffably secret; stories that are simply ‘made up’ and may never be fully enacted. This is the realm of literature, where the secondary imagination absolutely rules. But together with the historical, now intrinsic for both philosophy and theology, the literary is also, in postmodernity, inescapable.

Why should this be? It has to do with the double import of the imagination. The latter, as I have said, is the mediating twilight threshold between spirit and matter, or between reason and the senses. Its strangest characteristic as a ‘between’ phenomenon is that it resides ‘in the middle voice’, at once passive and active.¹⁵ Whereas we can control even where we direct our gaze, images flood into our mind when our eyes are shut, often unprovoked. All the same we can to some degree learn to conjure these images at will and to shape the precise form from which they take. However, at the point of seemingly most control, when we are being ‘creative’, it is more as if we must find the trick of ‘summonsing’ in to the chamber of our mind elusive hidden realities that are seemingly in some sense ‘already there’. (This is why, in Sufi thought, the imagination is seen as opening onto a realm of intermediate beings, rather as rarefied reason opens upon the angelic realm;¹⁶ similar considerations are found fragmentarily within Christendom in terms of the intrinsic link between imagination and ‘faerie’.).

¹⁵ For ‘the between’ (*metaxu*) see William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (New York: SUNY, 1995) For ‘the middle voice’ see Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) *passim*.

¹⁶ See Henri Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP 1997)

But this double aspect both renders thought more real, and reality more spectral. And this is exactly why modernity, which ever since the Renaissance has more and more opened up the power of the imagination (including the technical imagination), is at once more historical and more fantastic than were the Middle Ages. For a greater sense of our reliance upon the primary imagination grounds thought back in sensation and image, and makes us realise that our thinking is inseparable from our corporeal living and from all that has really happened to us. On the other hand, the further release of the secondary imagination (escaping from ecclesiastical, political and sexual censorship), reveals to us the fluidity of physical nature as such and the way that form and image is far more intrinsically spectral than even rational speculation.

This release can, of course, be part of a scenario whereby 'art' usurps the place of religion. On the other hand, it can also serve to point up the very core of the religious impulse in a clearer way than for the often more abstract reason-dominated Middle Ages. (And it is probably the case that only an appeal to the logic of the imagination allows the 'great tradition' of theology from Origen to Aquinas adequately to counter the more consistent rationalism of the nominalist revolution.) For the secondary imagination is also the very point at which reason and faith become conjoined. This is because the theological necessarily links rational reflection with the contemplative regard of historical events and visualised pictures or symbols. Its elusive blend of idea and image belongs precisely to the realm of the imaginative 'between'. Moreover, it is by exercise of the secondary imagination that we have to try to connect historical becoming (including the Incarnation and the emergence of the Church) with the descending emanation of all of nature and culture from the perfect Godhead.

Rationally informed faith therefore, is the exact place at which thinking about history (inhabited fictions and real-ideal occurrences) and thinking about literature (uninhabited fictions) comes together. Since religion concerns ‘believed-in fictions’ or fictions *that might be inhabited or in some sense already dimly are*, it transcends the contrast between literature and history, just as, in the life of Christ, *mythos*, as narrative saturated with meaning, and *historia*, as real event deficient in meaning, *really* (and not just in our supposing) come together.¹⁷

In the light of faith therefore, history and fiction both appear as different kinds of ontologically real realms, since they are both situated in the more all-embracing world disclosed by the light of faith: the world in which imagination discerns the link between emanative derivation (which we can only ‘fantasize’) on the one hand, and historical becoming on the other. Merely fideistic faith, by contrast, tends to ape a rationalistic reason without faith and a positivistically-conceived history, ignoring its constitutively ideal dimension (the way in which ‘what happens’ is always in part ‘what people think has happened’). Fideisms or fundamentalisms always notably downgrade imagination, or go for the kitsch, because they reduce *revelata* to factual assumptions and theology to a few simple and rigid rational deductions from those assumptions.

The reflections in this third section are intended to try to explain why, in the modern era from Hamann through to Tolkien via Claudel and Péguy, it has been literary works which have often most successfully defended and rethought the orthodox

¹⁷ For this thesis see John Milbank, ‘Atonement: Christ the Exception’ in *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 94-5

Christian legacy. Having understood this, we can in future take more systematic account of the literary-imaginative dimension.

By the agenda of 'theology, philosophy and literature' therefore, I propose in the first place a reflection on the theological origins of modern philosophy. In the second place a theological critique of modern philosophy. In the third place an attempt further to incorporate temporality into metaphysics. And in the fourth a realisation that a rationally informed faith requires the imaginary perspectives of literature as well as the imaginative perspectives of human history.