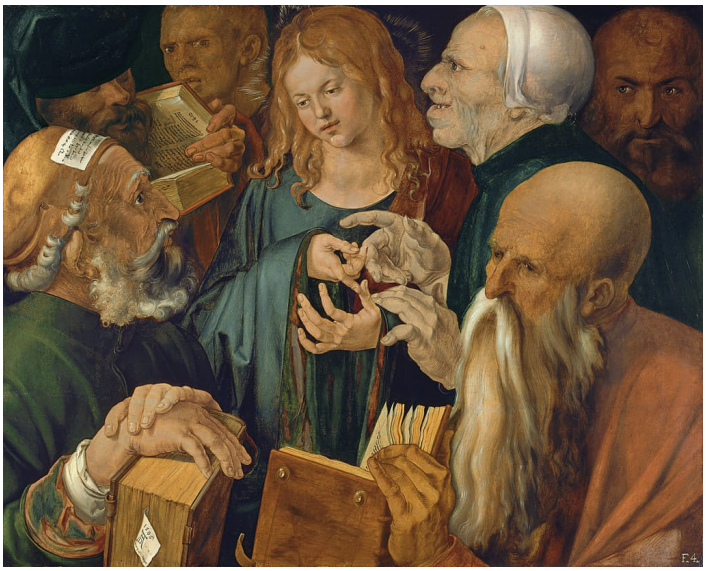

REVELATION, PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

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Olivier Boulnois is a French philosopher, specialist in Duns Scotus, Saint Augustine and more generally in medieval philosophy. He is the Director of studies at the École pratique des hautes études and Associate Professor at the Institut catholique de Paris, where he teaches religion and Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages.

He has recently written an interesting book which traces the history of "theological science" from its Greek emergence to the "collapse of the cornerstone" at the dawn of the sixteenth century. Far from being limited to the alternative between the God of revelation and the God of the philosophers, the Greek *theologia*, recuperated by the Latin Fathers and raised up as the "queen of sciences" by Scholasticism, has been the object, from the Thomistic moment onwards, of a deconstruction that continues into the contemporary period. Professor Boulnois sits down with *Philitt* to discuss his book.

Philitt (PL): Your book tells of the epic of theology, from its Greek emergence to the "end of the desire for God" in the modern era. Why have you reread the history of theology in the light of the "desire for truth" and what link do you establish between this desire for truth and the "desire for God?"

Olivier Boulnois (OB): We all live on clichés. For example, the idea that in the Middle Ages, philosophy was the servant of theology. But when we talk about philosophy being the "servant" of theology, we are taking the problem the wrong way round. For since its Aristotelian origin, theology is a philosophical science, the highest possible science, "theological science." When I have embarked on a history of theology "as science" (subtitle of the book), it was to show how it develops by differentiating itself, like the branches of a tree—one branch of theological science remains purely philosophical (and sometimes in conflict with religious thought), while another branch takes up revelation and gives an interpretation of it. To say that philosophy is the "servant" of theology is to say in reality that one branch of philosophy is grafted onto another and depends on it.

It is in this perspective that we must read the "desire for truth." Aristotle's *Metaphysics* begins, from its very first words, by stating that man desires above all to know the truth. But what fulfills this desire is par excellence philosophy. And the summit of philosophy is the science of the divine (which Aristotle calls theologike episteme, "theological science"). We must not forget that even the intellectual life is itself a way of living; it is even, for Aristotle, the highest form of existence. Now, in speaking of the desire

for God, Augustine says nothing less: if God is the sovereign good, He is also the one who fulfills our highest desires. There is thus a possible articulation between Aristotle's desire for truth and Augustine's desire for God. Moreover, for Augustine, God is the Truth; it is His most proper name. So, Augustine starts from the same analysis as Aristotle. In fact, he wrote: "Man desires nothing so much as the truth." But he places the summit in God—to know God is to know the supreme truth, to satisfy our deepest desire.

Olivier Boulnois.

PL: Tracing the life and destiny of theology as a science leads you to study its apogee and notify its decline. When do you situate this apogee and when does its decline begin?

OB: In reality, I did not really build my investigation on the pattern borrowed from the history of empires: rise and fall, *Aufstieg und Niedergang*. The birth of a theological science can be described quite precisely, if we analyze Aristotle closely. Later, with the Stoics, the Aristotelian concept was transformed into mythical, physical, and political theology. In the Hellenistic period, it became the supreme science of Neoplatonism. So, it is not a question of a rise, of a progress, but of a restructuring and a transformation.

What bothered me more was the other end of this story. As a historian of philosophy and, through that, a philosopher, I had an impression that was hard to justify: from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, roughly, theology was the predominant discipline; but then it ceased to be so. Why is this? There are institutional reasons for its predominance, since it was the Church that sponsored the university, and institutionalized the teaching of philosophy in the faculty of arts. But there are also doctrinal reasons: we are in a system of knowledge, an episteme, where the great philosophers are also great theologians (from Albert the Great to Pierre d'Ailly, for example). But from the 17th century on, we are hard pressed to find great theologians who have contributed something to philosophy. So, there was a rupture. Where does it come from?

I think we can put forward three hypotheses: First, the condemnation of Pomponazzi at the Lateran Council (1513). By generalizing its rejection of Pomponazzi's position and by demanding a philosophical demonstration of the immortality of the soul, the Council aimed at bringing philosophy to heel, by calling on philosophers to demonstrate certain essential truths of the faith (Descartes would still claim this). But this had an unexpectedly perverse effect. It actually stripped theology of its own object: if the philosopher becomes a "Christian philosopher," if his task is to demonstrate the truths of the Christian faith, what is left for the theologian?

The second hypothesis is that theology has become detached from the logic of desire found in both Aristotle and Augustine. For some theologians, everything happens as if, on the one hand, there were henceforth the natural desire of man, which could only be satisfied by philosophical truths and by the God of the philosophers, and on the other hand, the supernatural, which no longer comes to fill the natural desire, but which is in a way superimposed in its own order, placed in us by God, which means that the desire of God is no longer the natural desire of man. It is truly the genius of Henri de Lubac to have perceived the subtle deformations that occurred at the end of the Middle Ages and that brought about these mutations. So, I took up the matter again, reworking the texts. What I discovered was quite astounding: originally, this new definition of the desire for God was explicitly directed against St.

Thomas Aquinas. But when Cajetan makes it his own, he cannot speak out against Thomas, since he is the master general of the Dominican order and the defender of the Thomistic school. So, he slips this idea into his commentary on Thomas as if it were Thomas'. This is a typical example of what one does when one belongs to a school—one makes the master say what one thinks, not what he really said.

Finally, there is a third hypothesis, which is the idea that the new physics has supplanted theology. When we study the Galileo case, we see that Cardinal Bellarmine offered him a solution that was basically traditional; that maintained the superiority of theology while allowing him to support heliocentrism. It would have sufficed for Galileo to say that he spoke "according to the principles of natural science," and that he did not claim to speak the absolute truth, which belongs to theologians. And yet Galileo, with astonishing courage and obstinacy, was not satisfied with this solution: scientific truth, physical truth, must be absolute truth, on the same level as theological truth. But then, in mixed questions, where Scripture and science intertwine, it is the physicist and not the theologian who has the last word. Theology was no longer the master of Scripture interpretation; it was no longer the queen of the sciences, an untouchable, unquestionable discipline.

So, to come back to your question, there was a beginning, and then there was a relative decline of theology in the 16th century. Of course, theology as a teaching subject did not cease to exist, but it largely retreated into positive theology, i.e., into the search for proof that theological interpretations are indeed based on the Bible and tradition. It no longer had anything to say to man's desire.

PL: "All theology is therefore bound up with a metaphorology," you write. What meaning do you give to "metaphorology" and what place does it hold in the history of theology?

OB: The expression "metaphorology" is not mine. It comes from Hans Blumenberg, the author of *Paradigms for Metaphorology*. But curiously, Blumenberg does not have a general theory of metaphorology—he analyzes a series of "absolute metaphors;" that is to say, what we commonly call images in French: the light of truth, the heart of the problem, etc. We know very well that truth is not a sensitive light, that the problem has no beating heart, etc. But we cannot replace the light of truth with the heart of the problem. We cannot replace the light or the heart with an adequate concept. These images take the place of a concept.

On the contrary, when I speak of metaphorology, I am speaking of the theory of metaphor that was developed by the "theologians" of the three great revealed religions: for example, by Augustine, Al-

Farabi or Maimonides. The problem comes from the fact that the Scriptures are texts full of images: the hand of God, His throne of glory, His face and His back, etc. What are we to make of them? What are we to make of this? First of all, all authors agree on one point: we must go beyond any anthropomorphism. Unlike the gods of polytheism, the unique feature of the one God is that He is not visible; that He has no body, no representable form.

But then, should we say that these metaphorical images have no meaning and that the Scriptures are useless? A purely philosophical reading might be tempted to say so. But for most of our authors, the Scriptures serve a purpose: they are addressed, not to an elite of philosophers, but to the people who live by images and are guided by their desires and representations, in order to guide them towards salvation. The Bible and the Koran thus serve to form a people of believers, to frame it politically, to guide it morally and spiritually. But to make sense of metaphors, or to seek the truth beyond metaphors, is to interpret the Scriptures. Therefore, theology is an immense metaphorology. If the Scriptures are a forest of symbols, this means that we are never finished searching for their meaning. To go through them is to go through different levels of faith. This is Augustine's experience—we begin by taking everything literally; but then we notice the tensions and contradictions; the text seems absurd. So, one goes in search of deeper, more spiritual, "allegorical" readings. All exegesis presupposes a metaphorology. And without metaphorology, theology would not be possible.

PL: In your book, you note how, at different times in its history, theology has seen the threat of "double truth" arise and how theologians of each era have sought to avoid this duplication. What threat does the "double truth" represent for theological science and how has it responded to it, up to Galileo?

OB: In reality, it is the theologians who have invented this threat. And in believing to exorcise it, they made it exist. Strictly speaking, the expression appeared in 1277 in the writings of the bishop of Paris, to condemn the error of the masters of the faculty of arts. According to him, when they taught philosophy, they taught Aristotle and affirmed things that were contrary to the faith; but at the same time they proclaimed themselves to be good Christians, who upheld the truths of the faith. Saying one thing and thinking the opposite is the fantasy of the "double truth," which orthodoxy wants to fight.

Now what interested me was that we see, as early as Augustine, but obviously without the expression, the same fear, the same fantasy, being constructed. Except that Augustine's solution is not at all the same. It consists in limiting the validity of what the theologian can say. In matters of science, his teaching has no relevance. It is better not to make a pronunciation on sciences that are beyond our

understanding, for fear of being laughed at. But Thomas Aquinas brings up this argument several times. And Galileo makes it his main defense.

In the 13th century, there was clearly a problem of articulation between theology and philosophy. The condemnation of 1277 is only a symptom of a fundamental difficulty. But if we go beyond the bishop's suspicions, we see that the masters of the arts, in order to practice philosophy, sought to defend the autonomy of philosophy. For that, they admitted that what they taught was not the absolute truth—either they limited themselves to quoting and commenting on Aristotle's texts without holding them to be true, or they deployed their discourse from the data of natural science. For example, any serious interpreter of Aristotelian physics is obliged to admit an eternal world, because it is the cornerstone of his conception of the world. But of course, as a believer, the same individual can admit that the world is created; and this is for him an absolute truth. But it is precisely this form of autonomy, this way of basing philosophy on hypotheses, of seeing in it, truths that are true only relatively and not absolutely, that the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, interpreted as a "double truth." For his part, he had a simple solution: we forbid all philosophical propositions contrary to the Christian faith; and to be sure that no one takes them up, we make a list of them!

So, to answer your question, it was the intervention of theology that was a threat to philosophy, much more than the double truth was a threat to theology. The double truth did not threaten anyone, since it did not exist. It is an inquisitor's fantasy: nobody seriously supported it before the condemnation of 1277.

PL: The slow construction of theology as a science, from Aristotle to St. Thomas Aquinas, was suddenly shaken at the end of the 13th century. Do you share the idea that, from that time on, the history of theological science would be confused with that of Thomism? Who would you say was the last Thomist?

OB: I repeat, "theological science" goes back to Aristotle. It is not at all confused with Thomism. What we see is something else: the term *theologia* was a Greek term, foreign to the Latin language. Yet it emerged several times in Latin. First in Augustine, where it designated the Stoic conception of the various ways of relating to the gods (through myths, the laws of the city, or the science of nature). But, probably because the term was too deeply linked to polytheism, Augustine did not use the word to designate the discipline that he himself practiced. He preferred to speak of *philosophia christiana* ("Christian philosophy"), or "Christian doctrine." Boethius (5th century), at least once, translates Aristotle's expression, "theological science," by the word "*theologia*." Finally, Abelard (12th century) was the first to

call a book *Theologia*, no doubt in the sense of Boethius. For him, it was only the title of the book, a pedantic way of saying "Treatise on God." But it is from Abelard onwards, and it seems from his oral teaching onwards, that theology designates a separate discipline.

In the 13th century, what is new is that following the reception of Aristotle's principal treatises (notably those on science, the *Second Analytics*), the scientific status of theology is questioned—in the name of what, can this discipline call itself a science? And there, one notes a progressive elaboration, where all the important theologians of the 13th century contributed their stone to the edifice: Alexander of Halss, Bonaventure, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas. In this global movement, the great strength of Thomas is to have dared to make the great leap—to be the most Aristotelian of all. That is to say, to have had the courage to work, to assimilate and to criticize the greatest non-Christian philosophy available at the time. This is why his solution on theology as science is both the strongest and the most Aristotelian. It is the strongest because it affirms that our theology, the one we elaborate from revelation, depends on the science of the blessed (the one God and the angels have of themselves and of the truth); that it is "as if subordinated" (*quasi subalternata*, "quasi-subalternated") to this other science, a bit like (quasi) optics depends on the principles established by geometry. It is also the most Aristotelian, because it can be shown that this superior science coincides with what Aristotle called the "theological science" (which comes down to the science that God has of Himself). It is therefore precisely the introduction of Aristotle's metaphysical model into the heart of Christian thought.

As for the idea that theological science is then confused with Thomism, it is frankly false. In reality, Thomas was immediately attacked by his greatest successors precisely because he was found to be too Aristotelian. He was criticized for almost all his positions, and especially for theology as a science. For example, for his successor at the University of Paris, Henry of Ghent, the "quasi-subalternation" of which Thomas speaks is a deception—for those who have the science of revelation (men on earth) are not the same as those who have the divine science (the blessed). Then came other great theologians, all original—Duns Scotus, Peter Auriol, Ockham, Gregory of Rimini, Gabriel Biel, Luther. It was above all the Dominican order, and then the authority of the papacy, that allowed the maintenance of a Thomistic school (with all its internal contradictions, as we have seen in the case of Cajetan).

PL: If you establish the responsibility of certain Thomists in the decline of theology, you also insist on various "affairs" that toppled the medieval edifice, in particular the "Galileo affair." Could one say that theological scientificity has been the object of a "deconstruction" in the modern sense of the term?

OB: As I said, the assertion that the supernatural is completely external to man's desires was originally a non-Thomistic position. Then it crept into the Thomistic tradition, and it contaminated part of theology. But not all of it, since there were other traditions, more faithful to the Augustinian paradox—man desires to reach the truth, but he cannot reach it by himself; he needs grace. I have also spoken of the Galileo affair and I have mentioned the case of the Lateran Council V. There are surely other factors as well.

But then, can we say that there is a "deconstruction" of theological scientificity? Clearly, yes. Henri de Gand is only the first of a long series of criticisms. It is therefore a deconstruction that occurred at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century, one or two generations after Thomas. It is insistent on the idea that Christian theology has a specific status, that it rests solely on faith, and that it is therefore science only after the act of faith. It then becomes a hypothetico-deductive system—faith provides initial data, the articles of faith, which function as axioms, and theology speculates only afterwards, to deduce the consequences.

Consequently, the construction of theology as a science has only really held solidly for a century or so, between the first great Summits, such as that of Alexander of Hales, and the radical criticism made by William of Ockham. Then, we see the rebirth of new doctrinal syntheses, which are still called theological, but which each have their own model of scientificity. Each of them articulates, in different proportions, a part of exegesis and a part of rational speculation. At the end of the 14th century, it was the popes themselves who called for a "return to the sources;" that is to say to the Fathers of the Church against scholastic subtleties. And Thomas swings to the side of the classics—one must read Thomas because he is a more reliable source, because he supports a kind of common position prior to the conflict of interpretations in the 14th century. We also see the birth of "schools": the great universities of the Renaissance begin to have chairs: a chair of Scotism, a chair of Albertism (inspired by Saint Albert the Great), a chair of Thomism, etc.

PL: Modern philosophy's criticism of the "ontotheological constitution of metaphysics," as Heidegger puts it, parasitizes the fate of both theology and metaphysics. To what do you attribute such an impasse? Does the alternative between thinking being without God and thinking God without being have a future?

OB: The problem, when revealed theology is understood as a science, is that, in order to be a science, it has to model itself on Aristotle's theological science. At that point, it carries on its shoulders the whole history of metaphysics. Now Heidegger has described metaphysics as an ontotheology. It should be

noted first of all that this is not in itself an insult; it is a description. I have criticized elsewhere (in the book *Métaphysiques rebelles*) this description, because I found it simplistic; this model must be multiplied, to adapt it to different cases.

But of course, this characterization of the God of metaphysics is also intended, according to Heidegger, to oppose the God of philosophy and the God of faith. And obviously, if we want to think philosophically today about the God of revelation (and not go around in circles talking only about the God of philosophers), we must think about the God of faith, hope and charity. If we want to think of the living God, we gain absolutely nothing by reintroducing here the question of being. To think the God of believers, and not an abstract concept, we must start from Revelation. We must also start from what it means to believe, hope and love; but this amounts to the same thing, since it is through Revelation that we can say and understand what it means to believe, hope in and love God.

PL: At the end of your study, you emphasize the emergence of a "new form of *philosophia christiana*." Why did you use this expression? To what fate does "Christian philosophy" seem to you to be destined?

OB: Ah, I see that my sentence can be taken backwards. So, I have expressed myself badly. The "*philosophia christiana*" here is not what Gilson called "Christian philosophy." It is the doctrine that the Fathers of the Church practiced, before the construction of theology as a science—it is the interpretation of the Scriptures, the interpretation of Christian existence in the light of the Scriptures, and the interpretation of the Scriptures in the light of Christian existence. Augustine also says, "Christian doctrine." I sincerely believe that the work of deciphering the Scriptures, of interpreting their metaphorical images, of overcoming their apparent contradictions, and thus of discovering a spiritual meaning, is the work of a lifetime, in every sense of the word. The Christian faith is not a system, a worldview, an ideology, to which one adheres or not. It is something that one discovers, that one deepens, in which one progresses. When we try to acquire an understanding of it, it provokes a virtuous and endless circle—faith seeks intelligence, and intelligence seeks faith. Augustine said it very well.

It is in this sense that I was talking about returning to the *philosophia christiana*. This has little to do with what Gilson called "Christian philosophy." Let us say that there are at least two meanings of the expression "Christian philosophy" in Gilson, depending on whether he is a historian or a philosopher. As a historian, his genius was to say, even if reason is a natural faculty, and if philosophy is an autonomous discipline, historically, we can see that Christianity did not leave philosophy in the state in which it had found it. Christianity has deeply affected, stimulated, modified, enriched and transformed the

fundamental concepts of philosophy. In this sense, there was indeed a history of Christian philosophy; that is, of philosophy in a Christian regime. But as a philosopher, Gilson increasingly hardened his position, arguing that Christianity, in a way, required a certain number of philosophical theses, and that, basically, the truly Christian philosophy was that of Saint Thomas Aquinas. In the climate of the 1930s to 1950s, this theory is understandable. But today it no longer makes much sense. Today, a Christian philosopher does not have to defend certain pre-assigned theses. He is simply someone who tries to understand his faith better, and to think about contemporary questions in the best possible way, in the most rational and scientific way.

Featured: *Jesus among the Doctors*, by Albrecht Dürer; painted in 1506.