

REASON AND REVELATION IN THE MIDDLE AGES

(ETIENNE GILSON)

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Etienne Gilson is one of those men who shot across the sky of the West in the first half of the twentieth century, and were mostly forgotten by the end of the century, thrown overboard in the general wreck of Christendom. He combined in his thought any number of now-unfashionable currents: a love for Roman Catholicism and high medievalism; a focus on Thomistic thought; a dislike for the downsides of the modern world; and many more. No wonder he has slipped from our memory, or more accurately, been erased by neglect. But, as with other thinkers from his vanished time, from Carl Schmitt to Henri de Lubac, there are signs his star is rising again (though to some it is a baleful star), so I am here to summarize a little of his thought.

This book may be the best I have ever read at pithily summarizing complex philosophy. Of course, it's important to remember that summarizing is what it's doing—there is much, much more beneath what Gilson outlines here, not that I am qualified to tell you what that is. But one has to start somewhere, and given that almost all of what Gilson discusses has been forgotten, this is a great place to start. The book actually originated as three lectures that Gilson gave during a visit to the University of Virginia in 1937, where he had taught a summer school class in 1926, and he dedicates the book to his hosts in Charlottesville. It is sad to note, though, that this sort of talk was once given to undergraduates itself shows how we have deteriorated in the past eighty years.

In a sense, the purpose of this book is to justify the ways of God to Man, or at least to show that moral reasoning in the West has followed a course of development in which reason matters as much as revelation, and between the two there is no necessary contradiction. To moderns accustomed to the mewlings of people like John Rawls being characterized as philosophy, what Gilson outlines here is itself a revelation, although as I say I am certainly not qualified to pass judgment on the accuracy or completeness of what Gilson discusses. He explicitly rejects the Gibbon-esque trope that high Greek philosophy was suppressed by the obscurantist Dark Ages, and philosophy was then rescued and renewed by the modern Enlightenment age of humanism. He notes

that he won't have much to say about Greek philosophy, and less about modern, but what he wants to offer is "a sketch of the main spiritual families which were responsible for the copious philosophical and theological literature of the Middle Ages."

Gilson starts by distinguishing between two currents of Western thought on philosophy. The first, always found in Christianity, in men such as Tertullian and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, down to Thomas à Kempis, consisted of those who had "an absolute conviction in the self-sufficiency of Christian Revelation," and thus wholly rejected philosophy itself. The second, and stronger, current, began with Saint Augustine and sought to marry philosophy and revelation. In Gilson's conception, the first group, those opposed to philosophy in all its forms, had the wrong of both Scripture and reason, and Christians could and should, and did, begin by building upon late Greek philosophy (which had long since left the gods of Olympus behind). Still, even among the Christian philosophers, there was no unanimity. "[A]ll the Augustinians agree that unless we believe, we shall not understand; and all of them agree as to what we should believe, but they do not always agree as to what it is to understand." Gilson views this lack of uniformity as flexibility and therefore a key to continued relevance over time; he draws contrasts, for example, between the Greek bases of much of Augustine's thought, including debts to Plato and Plotinus, and Saint Anselm's eleventh-century thought that, still very similar, owed very little to Greek philosophy, but a great deal to new forms of logic—"the same faith as that of Augustine, but a very different understanding." From there, beginning with Roger Bacon, the tradition was continued, but logic was downgraded, in favor of experiential and experimental mysticism. Thus, at the end of the medieval tradition, many threads had intertwined that explicated revelation through various forms of reason, with greater or lesser persuasive ability and greater or lesser persuasive impact, depending on the time and the audience.

This is the end of the first lecture. The next turns at an angle, to discuss rationality, noting that modern rationalism began in the West, but did not begin in the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth century, but rather earlier, flowing out of currents in Islam, where some Muslims wrote in deliberate opposition to the overwhelming ultimate Muslim rejection of joining revelation and reason. (Gilson doesn't mention the

Enlightenment at all; the ludicrous idea that scientific rationalism had anything to do with the Enlightenment is a purely late modern piece of propaganda.) In this line of history, Gilson outlines the thought of Avicenna (died A.D. 1037) who, like Augustine, allowed for the co-existence of philosophy and religion (and who influentially demonstrated the necessary existence of God as a being that cannot not exist), and the subsequent excoriation of Avicenna by al-Ghazali (died A.D. 1111), in his famous *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, in which al-Ghazali noted the obvious conclusion, that rationalism cannot be harmonized with the Q'uran, and endorsed occasionalism, the denial of cause-and-effect other than as the direct result of God's will, a position deleterious to both philosophy and science and thereafter the dominant Muslim position. Then Averroes (Ibn Rushd; died A.D. 1198) attempted to restore the role of philosophy and the exaltation of Aristotle in particular, but was mostly unsuccessful, even though his quasi-Gnostic division of the world into levels of appropriate understanding for different types of people was pretty clever. In fact, as with many modern philosophers, Averroes probably didn't believe in revelation at all, and his influence in Islam has been nearly zero, but his influence in the West was enormous (helped by his living in Spain, which maintained extensive intellectual contacts with the rising Europeans). His influence, though, introduced through the "Latin Averroists" into Europe the same quasi-Gnostic idea that pure philosophy could not be easily reconciled with revelation, except by regarding them as parallel tracks to the truth, the so-called doctrine of the twofold truth. It is not that all these men were hidden atheists, as some would have (though some certainly were; Gilson cites John of Jandun, an associate of Marsilius of Padua), and some rejected much rationalism, such as Etienne Tempier, the Bishop of Paris, who in 1277 condemned many Averroist propositions. But in the main they struggled mightily with the problem of reconciling reason and revelation, and usually solved the problem by dodging it.

So far, a dialectic—thesis and antithesis, so what comes next must be synthesis. And sure enough, on cue, in his third lecture, Gilson rolls out Saint Thomas Aquinas, to harmonize reason and revelation. Gilson credits Aquinas with tackling head on the problems that entangled earlier medieval philosophers, and with being the first to concretely apply principles of order and essence that had earlier been partially developed

by others, such as Moses Maimonides. Aquinas distinguished between two realities that could not intersect—"I know by reason that something is true because I see that it is true; but I believe that something is true because God has said it." One cannot believe something that you know to be true, such as that I stand before you. Thus, "an act of faith cannot be caused by rational evidence, but entails an intervention of the will. . . . In short, one and the same thing cannot be at one and the same time both an object of science and an object of faith." In a sense, this separation is obvious, but Aquinas was the first to point it out.

It is important to note that Aquinas did not include as "objects of faith," susceptible only of belief, certain elements also included in revelation that he believed could be demonstrated by reason, such as the existence of God (though not His aspects) or the immortality of the soul. But logical proofs of God's existence such as those of Anselm were held by Aquinas to not be of real value—they are "dialectical probabilities," not proofs—and founding faith on reasoning alone is a mistake. Proofs do exist of some revealed truths, but they are not reasoning proofs, instead they are proofs of evidence and witness, and certain truths, such as the Trinity, cannot be approached by either reasoning or any direct proof. Gilson outlines these subtle distinctions among the categories into which Aquinas divided matters of faith and reason, concluding that this was the pinnacle of medieval blending of theology and philosophy.

Still, the solutions of Aquinas did not sweep the field and retain dominance. Instead, the influence of Averroes and his school crept back in, or had never really left, and those who followed after Aquinas, especially John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, expanded (perhaps without intending it) to include almost all Christian truths the list of conclusions not susceptible to reason, ending by creating the ultimately destructive idea of univocity, that God has at least one point of commonality with humans, existence in the same sense as man, in an attempt to make reasoning about God more feasible, which in time reasoned God out of perceived relevance. The end result was "the total wreck of both scholastic philosophy and scholastic theology as the necessary upshot of the final divorce of reason and Revelation." We therefore got, ultimately, the rejection of the attempt to keep the two married, first by men such as Erasmus, closely followed by men such as Luther, and the modern world has not profited as a result. Gilson

would, I am sure, heartily endorse what Brad Gregory has to say on these topics in *The Unintended Reformation*, which is a sort of sequel to Gilson's short book. In fact, I strongly recommend reading that book and this together; they will form at least a framework for thought in the new world, as the cracks of the modern world expand. And, at a minimum, reading Gilson's will give you an untainted and unbiased view of what philosophy used to be, before the postmodernists came along and ruined it, for the time being.