

Philosophical Theology

By Dr Léon Hubert Peters: 24/6/2018.

INTRODUCTION.

As an introduction, this research paper seeks to shed light on the relationship or type of relationship existing between Philosophy and Theology. It begins by defining key words and terms such as philosophy, philosophical theology and Christian theology. The definition of the word philosophy helps the reader understand its use in a general sense, for example; a purely critical, systematic, and rational approach of any component in the study of philosophy, (existence, reason, values etc.). "Christian" precedes the word theology in the sense that the doctrine treated, rises from the Christian faith. It also differentiates from pure Judaist theology (particularly considering events cited in Acts 3, 4, and 8 – Jewish refute of Christ as God's Messiah and persecution against their Christian brothers), by placing the philosophy (way of life) of Christ in the limelight. Thus, acknowledging the authority and authenticity of the teachings put forward by the New Testament, without renouncing the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament. Hereafter, in response to the question: "How is Philosophy related to Theology?"

Philosophy will be dealt with in relation to the Christian response of God and his dealings with mankind. In a further attempt to clarify the relationship between these two positions, attention is paid to some of the most troublesome issues within Christian Tradition from its conception, and which continued well after the apostolic ministry had ended. Efforts are also made to show the role one played in relation to the other, to either apologetically clarify the position which was proper to Christian theology or Christian doctrine, or ward off syncretism (doceticism, asceticism, and libertine mine sets), that had been endorsed by false teachers - Pagan, Jewish and Christian thinkers - for the sole purpose of misleading the saints. The apostle Paul's agreement to the similitude which exist in the recognition of the one true God and other arguments, are used to show how Philosophy and Theology (Christian), pursue the same goal and how they go hand in hand.

Philosophy (general definition).

Philosophy is the study of general and fundamental problems such as those connected with existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and language. It is distinguished from other ways of addressing such problems by its critical, generally systematic approach and its reliance on rational argument (definition provided by NTS, supported by Wikipedia, retrieved; 08/30/2014).

Philosophical theology and Christian philosophy (definition).

Philosophical theology is both a branch and form of theology in which philosophical methods are used in developing or analyzing theological concepts. While Christian philosophy is a development in philosophy that is characterized by coming from a Christian tradition.

PHILOSOPHY'S RELATIONSHIP TO THEOLOGY.

Philosophy functioned as a religion, as does Christianity for many today. It offered a set way

of life for many in the ancient world yet was in constant mutation being opened to debate and constant development.

Philosophy is related to theology in aim or goal, because they both are in quest of wisdom which pertains to the existence of human beings. Human reason is the basis of philosophy, while Christian theology makes use of reason, yet rests on revelation. Philosophy is employed in the treatment of questions of a religious sort. However, Christian theology addresses questions put forward by philosophy. The Bible from which Christian theology derives its authority, although not a book of philosophy, contains a multiplicity of philosophical responses.

"The Bible is not a book of philosophy. It contains a lot of philosophy. It answers philosophical questions such as, does God exist? Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? By what rule or standard should we live? The Bible in putting forth God's philosophy, sets itself against all other philosophies. But while the Bible answers the most profound philosophical questions ever conceived by human beings, it is not primarily a philosophy book." Glenn Rogers 'A General Introduction to The Bible and Bible Study'.

During his tenure in Athens, Paul adapted the philosophical approach using reasonable arguments in defense of the Christian faith. The market place was the ideal venue for making such philosophical defenses and would incite debate by the populace especially the learned - the philosophers (Epureans and Stoics) Acts 17:16-18 KJB.

"Philosophy's origin lies with Hellenistic thinkers who philosophized the mythology and cults as well as foreign oracular utterances and initiatory lore. Hence it was no surprise why the Athenians thought it reasonable to give respect to their pantheon of gods, whom it was assumed lived on Mount Olympus." Dr. E. Zeller, 'A History of Greek Philosophy' London Longmans, Green and Co. 1881.

When Christian theology was tried or put to the test before the Areopagus, (the Athenian tribunal whose assembly was composed of judges, philosophers and highly competent literary scholars) the apostle Paul's responses fitted the systematic approach used by philosophy. His answers informed the court on matters concerning the existence of both God and humanity, the knowledge of God, his attributes, character, purpose, their societal values of piety and worship to 'the unknown God,' on reason - by highlighting what was visible and acceptable for them, God's providence, and mind/thought and language – the reflections of their scholars (poets). The comparison between the two pole positions: Greek philosophy and the clarifying Christian's philoso-theological defense was striking and persuasive. Nevertheless, when revelation (verse 30) and the "irrational" (verses 31,32) were to be assimilated the case was dismissed. Nevertheless, Christian theology had stood the trial and was victorious. For while the apostle's responses could not have been dismissed because they did not make sense, they were susceptible to the point of fixing a future hearing of the matter (Acts 17:22-32) KJB. Unlike the philosophies that had been brought to Athens to the pleasure of those debating philosophers, this (revelation) was limit. Though reason as a strong point took center stage, revelation needed some form of rational explanation to be judged, so further research to be undertaken by the court, might have also been the reason for the adjournment.

The Areopagus needed to know most certainly how and by what means God would give life to mankind. Whereas for some, especially Stoic philosophers, reason and ethics were their gospel as a goal towards achieving happiness. Paul's discourse of the good news along

with others which composed the biblical canon of the New Testament, answered these questions for many philosophers, centuries later and even for us today. *"In the gospel the answer to the question, how God will give life, unfolds before our very eyes. We see Jesus (God in human form) come into the world, representing God to us as he lives a perfect, sinless life. Then we see God offer himself on the cross, so humanity's sin can be forgiven, so he can live with God in heaven. Jesus said that he came to this world, so people could have eternal life."* (Glenn Rogers). Ralph Cudworth, one of the Cambridge Platonists (1617-1688), sides with Paul and Rogers as he propounded an ante-determinist system of philosophy grounded in his conception of God as a fully perfect being, infinitely wise and good. Cudworth states; *"the created world reflects the perfection, wisdom, and goodness of its creator."* Ralph Cudworth, *'True Intellectual System of The Universe'*. (1678).

That Jesus was God in human form and may have lived a perfectly sinful life, would surely have an impact on the way the assembly or even the masses reacted to Christian theology. Most scholars depended on gnosis or secret knowledge for salvation, believing that the body as matter was evil. Consequently, with the notion that only spiritual things and the spirit can be good as was admitted by Docetics, this story of Jesus was an impossible feat. For in this case, he was bound to be a sinner or would appear as human when he was not.

Gnosticism.

As philosophy influenced the way people, including Christians thought, philosophical ideas help us to understand the way Christian theology, especially the gospel was interpreted and used. Studying these ideas enabled Christian apologists to bridge the gap using philosophical arguments as did Paul, to support a proposition of the Christian faith or when necessary to defend it.

Gnosticism according to Glenn Rogers, was a problem that the Church as holder of Christian Theology had to deal with. It was a false doctrine that taught the physical body was evil but that the spirit was good. With this thought they concluded that the body could be allowed to indulge itself completely without any negative consequences to the spirit or the person (Libertines). But these teachings are in total contradiction to the theological response detained in the gospel or the Bible on a whole. When Paul addressed the false teachers in his treatise to the Colossians it was against philosophers possibly Gnostics (Col.2:8,9) KJVB. Teachers in Ephesus had come under the influence of Gnosticism, again Paul's instructions to Timothy for that congregation was against false teachings, (1Tim.1:3,4) KJVB. The apostle John wrote his gospel and letters at a time when Gnosticism posed serious problems. Docetics or those holding that Jesus was not human needed to be answered and Christians needed to be assured. John's defense in response to that problematic was more of a philosophical nature, it defended and clarified doubts which pertained to the deity, place as creator, and humanity of Christ. Jesus is seen coexisting with God and is the Logos or the word through whom all things came into existence. This Jesus would bring light to a world of darkness that mankind may be saved from death (Jn.1:1-4). See Everett Ferguson's book, *Background of early Christianity* (1993) for an excellent overview of Gnosticism.

Asceticism.

As we saw earlier Gnostics were grouped as Libertines and Docetics. Yet there was still another group among them called Ascetics (Wilson 1993:255-256). While Gnostics believed that the human body as well as the entire physical world was inherently evil, Ascetic Gnostics

believed that the body needed to be severely disciplined to be controlled. Consequently, physical pleasure was discouraged. Even marriage, because it included sexual relationship was discouraged. Here again we see Paul making a philosophical defense against this false doctrine. Because this false truth detained certain similitudes, (in what could be determined as a form of piety, which is a common practice in Christianity) to Christian theological thought was not to be taken lightly. Rather the church was to treat it as another subtle attack of the devil, which would do damage to the faith of the saints. See 1Timothy 4:1-3. While some Christians may not have averted from the ascetic's doctrine of deprivation of certain corporal pleasures, many others believed that such extremes were not right or healthy. According to Mattox, (1961:120) as he notes Clement of Alexandria wrote that marriage was proper and used Peter's marriage as an example. Mattox states: *"that while Ascetism may not have been the primary cause for the doctrine of celibacy, as the idea of a separate priesthood developed (in the clergy-laity system), it shows to what degree Christians had been influenced by those Gnostic teachers."*

All the above arguments show in some way the relationship which exists between philosophy and Christian theology. We saw the relationship as it pertains to religion. For what philosophy tried to treat through pagan religious thought, Christian theology addressed; for example, Paul before the Areopagus. In this light we may duly deduce that philosophy deals with religious questions and Christian theology addresses philosophical questions. We can also deduce that philosophy did not shape the original Christian message, in that the chiefs of Greek and Hellenistic minds were not ultimately versed in divine matters where revelation was concerned. Nevertheless, philosophy did influence the way all people thought including Christians. The numerous treatise of Paul and John among others, against divergent philosophies or false doctrines points to that reality.

Another point which reflects the relationship between philosophy and theology, can be seen in the strict applications Ascetics made of their philosophical theories. Thus, deducing that philosophy like Christian theology, contains theoretical and practical elements.

We learned earlier that Christianity and philosophy are related because they both seek a common goal; for example, they answer questions concerning existence, knowledge, values, reason etc., but we also know that there are two different approaches employed in the process. One is based entirely on reason, while the other is reasonable but rests on revelation. An analogy which could probably shed light to the difference yet counting it in the relationship between the two concepts is this. Let us suppose in a family setting there are two brothers, the youngest is named Philosophy and the eldest Christian theology. The family's title or surname is 'Rendering Service to Humanity', in that they make a concerted effort to inform humans on certain mind-boggling questions which troubles them. For instance, questions concerning existence, the human condition, the afterlife, and God among others. When asked for an opinion on the matter, the youngest, depending on what little experience he had coupled with his high intellectual capacity, gave his response. The eldest in dealing with the same question, certainly used of his intellect, but as he was spiritually inclined, also included his experiences gain through divine revelation to bring authenticity to what the youngest could not otherwise have known except the author of humanity himself had revealed it. Here we see that, divergence in opinion does not necessarily mean that there is no relationship between the persons holding them. It can be argued that they are of the same family, 'Rendering Service to Humanity'. From this point of view, we may assume that Christian theology which gleans a wealth of information from the

Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, clarifies, completes or even at times counteracts certain solutions and hypotheses advanced by the philosophical inquiry, which as a discipline or “doctrine” possibly for the Graeco-Roman world, dates approximately to the 5th century B.C.E.

PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY.

The Romans continued with their Greek predecessor's culture and religious beliefs. Much of that religious system was based on nature, wherein natural elements and phenomena were transformed into divine beings who lived at Mount Olympus. Their religious practices were anchored in the state and controlled by it. Complimentary to the state cult were mystery religions, these were concerned about the individual's welfare and demanded elaborate purification and initiation rites to become a member (Zeller). Considering this millennial religion practiced by these two civilizations, Christian theology was likened to a light weight boxer in opposition to a super heavy weight champion. Christian philosophy deemed suspect, was obliged to adopt the philosophical approach, to at least like Paul at Areopagus make a defense. Apologia a Greek word for “defense” gave birth to the English word apologetic.

Facing great persecution in Rome the Church birthed writers to defend the Christian faith known as “Apologists”. They sought to explain Christian doctrine in philosophical terms to pagan intellectuals and Greek philosophers. This philosophical approach, served in quenching the hysterical attacks of “the unbelievers” brought against Christians, but it failed to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity. Christian's philosophical defenders argued that the Christian theological message is not only an ideal explanation of existence, but it is redemptive as well. So, we can assume that Christian apologists attempted to bridge the gap by using philosophical arguments to support their proposition of the Christian faith. And that Christianity offers what is complimentary to human findings, that which would not have otherwise be known unless revealed. In other words, redemption is made possible only through Christ without whom, none existing can be saved, (Acts 4:12).

Once again philosophy is related to theology for (apologia) defense. It was now in face of persecution this defense was to be made. It was surely not in the market place, rather it was to be done in the best written form. Restraint, suspicion, and inferiority were among the charges to which Christians responded, apart from their position of faith. Thus, during the reign of Septimius Severus (AD 193-211), Christians assembled privately in houses and sequestered places. They could not build churches, buy land, nor elect ecclesiastical ministers in public. In AD 202, Severus enacted a law prohibiting the spread of Christianity and Judaism '[Article on Roman History](#)' Wikipedia, Retrieved on 28/08/2014. This edict was geared at restraining Christianity as it was against new converts, but also aimed at exposing to danger, and punishing zealous teachers and missionaries in the Christian community. In face of such drastic measures taken against Christians, none would doubt the need for enlightenment, defense against atrocity, and encouragement for the saints. Clement of Alexandria, an apologist of renown in that epoch wrote; “*many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded before our eyes,*” {Philip Schaff's, [History of the Christian Church](#), Vol.1, Apostolic Christianity: A.D.1-100 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), p.57.} Clement was well placed to defend Christian theology, doctrine or faith, he had studied philosophy and theology, and was head of a Christian school charged with the propagation of the Christian faith based in Alexandria.

During the first widespread Christian persecution under Decius (AD 249-251), Christianity was condemned as a recent and criminal superstition. Bishops of larger cities were exiled or put to death, and the clergy of Rome was prevented during 16 months from electing a new bishop for that city. Bishops were asked to acknowledge their office and public character in an edict issued to the bishops by Gallienus. Finally, Diocletian and his fellows saw the Christian renunciation of the gods and institutions of Rome as the Christians' way of constituting a distinct republic and were needed to be suppressed before having an army. They perceived that Christianity was already governed by its own laws and magistrates, had its public treasury, held frequent assemblies of bishops whose decrees were implicitly obeyed by their congregations. These events among countless others, really needed attention. The written discourse had to be up to mark to rival scholars trained by philosophers and Greek teachers. This was particularly so as it was customary for the Roman aristocracy to be instructed by those intellectuals. Undoubtedly, the ideas contributed by ancient philosophy were important knowledge for understanding the way the masses interpreted and used Christian theology and most particularly the gospel. Paul, probably one of the most renown Christian apologists of all times, made use of his knowledge of philosophical literature during the Areopagus discourse (Acts 17:28). It is only fitting and just that philosophy be associated to theology to remedy those problems.

CONCLUSION.

In concluding, the relationship of Philosophy to Theology must be seen in such a sense as one complimenting the other. Philosophy brings a portion of the answer to enlightenment or if we may say truth. Theology crowns the work of philosophers or clarifies uncertainty brought about by human speculation. Ties can be acknowledged in their common aim which is to provide answers to humanity. Man, his environment, relations to God or the gods, and the afterlife are some of the common question that ignites the human quest for knowledge. For instance, when Philosophy would hold to reincarnation as a response to the question of what happens when we die? Christian Theology would clarify that by stating, there is a judgment of the living and the dead as well as consequences which follow, heaven or hell. To most adepts of philosophy this may be absurd or even pure insanity, but this is where the difference between the two lies. Clement of Alexandria agreed to the fact that Philosophy and Theology go hand in hand. Concerning the doctrine of creation, Clement held to the belief that all truth is one and comes from the Father. Therefore, the truths produced by secular science, must be considered one with the truths of revelation, and thus there was much to be learned from the philosophers (*'An Overview of Clément's Teachings,'* Dictionary of African Christian Biography, retrieved 09/15/2014). In today's world, the Christian community is bombarded with a host of thoughts or philosophies. These have given rise to diverse schools of thought within the Universal Church. Some have based their teachings on reason, others on false doctrine which has diverted drastically from New Testament teachings. And yet still there are others who quite blatantly condone immoral acts and associate pagan imagery in their places of worship. The question is, what can we say about those points concerning individuals and systems mentioned above? My response is, that it is their philosophy.

And those who adhere to those principles, like the ancient Greek philosophers, and intellectuals have accepted them as a way of life. It is their philosophy of what life is or should be and may be well ignorant of the repercussions those thoughts can engender. Accordingly,

Clement stated that in Alexandria, Christianity was a widely accepted philosophy of life. Philosophy and Theology were so close there (in Alexandria), that every theologian had to be well acquainted with Philosophy. Another quote of the apologist is; *"Philosophy therefore is a preparation, making ready the way for him who is being perfected in Christ,"* Dictionary of African Christian Biography. Is it therefore wrong for Christians to be acquainted with the modern way of life and the differing philosophical arguments used to defend it? No, for example one might say that philosophical knowledge is not a must, I agree, but if confronted by the Rastafarians on the bases of you eating meat and they not, Paul's response to Ascetics would be of great help (1Tim.4:1-5). This knowledge could equip you to inquire on his doctrine and the origin of his not eating of meat idea. You may well possess the answer and the key to conversion, by completing the equation. A proper biblical response would be Paul's exhortation to young Timothy, (2Tim. 2:14-16). Philosophy is a stepping stone for everyone seeking enlightenment but once the truth is completed with the Theological response, one must be keen not to let Philosophy sweep it away stealthily. A reasoned defense of the word of God will attract a listener, the rest is up to the Holy Spirit to travel the extra mile. Do remember that Christian Theology was against the odds for centuries, but with God's help it has become a way of life for billions of people around the world. Christians must devote valuable time for study to discern the various winds of doctrine, brought about by those who seek to do nothing else than undermine Christians' progress, to make humanity fully aware of what will befall the ignorant and the wicked.