

From ecclesiastical doctrine to Christian wisdom.

A Philosophical Interpretation of a Recent Transformation in Religion and Society.¹

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0. Introduction

In order to substantiate the claim that religions transform themselves continuously as a result of their interplay with society I want to present a philosophical interpretation of a case-study concerning a recent development of Catholic religion. During the late 19th and a major part of the 20th century Catholic religion and theology was dominated by neothomism. In the first part of my paper, I will present a short overview of this philosophic-theological doctrine, and show how it responded to the intellectual needs of that time. However, since the seventies of last century, Western society transformed into its late or postmodern shape, thus confronting (Catholic) religion with new questions and challenges. In the second part of my paper I will show the impact of this societal change on Christian religion.

1. Neothomism

The main reason of neothomism's popularity was that it could answer the specifically modern shape of the question of the relation between faith and reason, namely the rift between faith and scientific rationality. Especially since the second half of the 19th century, when positivism became more and more popular, it became a real threat to Christian religion. Positivism claimed that the religious and metaphysical types of explanation were irrational, and had to be replaced by a type of explanation that was based only on 'positive' facts.

Confronted with this challenge, it was no wonder that the Church felt an urgent need to check the progress of positivism. Hence she looked for a way to prove the fundamentals of Christian faith as objectively and scientifically as possible, so that they could stand the test of positivism. The result was neothomism, which claimed to be a return to Thomas Aquinas, who, in his own time, had developed a synthesis of faith and reason. However, in comparison to the *pre-modern theology* of Thomas Aquinas, neothomism actually had all the characteristics of *modern philosophy*. It rested on the conviction that there was a natural agreement between philosophy and Christian faith. The neothomist doctrine of God is an excellent illustration of this agreement. It understood God in ontological terms, namely as Being itself, and concluded that Being is the proper name of God and that this

¹ This paper is part of a larger contribution to the volume: Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (eds.), *The Appeal of a Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*. Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, to be published in 2015.

name designates God's very essence. This highlights the ontotheological character of neothomism: it conjoined the Biblical verse, in which God reveals his name, with modern ontology, and gave priority to the ontological problem of God's existence over the religious question of his name, and to a philosophical argument over a religious narrative. Another important aspect of neo-Thomism was that it substantiated in a rational way the (moral) ends of science and technology, and thus presented an alternative to the growing influence of social Darwinism on morality.

With hindsight, neothomism was a well-developed attempt to adapt faith to the modern world, especially to modern philosophy and the scientific worldview. But by doing so, it inevitably accepted the presuppositions of modern rationality. In particular, its ontological approach of God was as rationalistic and foundational as modern science. Because of this, neothomism was able to enter into a constructive discussion with modern science, and indeed offered an alternative to positivism. But the flipside was that, through the dominance of this rationalistic and foundational approach, it presented itself as a closed, quasi scientific system: very abstract and rationalistic, and involved in philosophical debates about God's essence and existence. Phrased negatively, it failed to do justice to the apophatic tradition, which plays a crucial role in Christian theology ever since Pseudo-Dionysius. Furthermore, it de-contextualised the religious idea of God by abstracting from the various practices of faith and their socio-historic and existential context: the God of neothomistic philosophy does not function and does not have to function in the concrete contexts of personal piety or communal worship.

2. Christian wisdom in a world of the seekers

Since the sixties of last century, Christian religion and the Catholic Church in particular have been confronted with a new challenge: the rise of expressive individualism and pluralism in all Western societies, resulting in that everyone has become a seeker, looking for an authentic and truthful orientation of his or her life. As I will show, the most promising way for Christian religion to respond to this challenge is to restore its tradition of wisdom, thus presenting itself as a reasoned way of life, which offers the seekers a truthful life-orientation.

In the introduction of his book on Christian wisdom, David Ford notes that wisdom may be making a comeback, after it has been associated for a long time with old people, tradition and conservative caution in a culture of youth, modernisation, innovation and risky exploration. The revival of wisdom is especially evident in areas where knowledge and (technical) know-how come up against questions of ethics, values, beauty, the shaping and flourishing of the whole person, the common good, and long-term perspectives.² Any wisdom needs to take seriously the desire for some sense of overall

² David Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 1.

meaning and connectedness, and also for guidance in discernment in specific situations.³ This means that wisdom requires an objective as well as a subjective integration or connectedness, and, hence, has an aspect of theoretical learning as well as of practical virtue: someone who has a vast knowledge about moral subjects, but who lives foolishly himself, would not be termed wise.⁴ In what follows, I will develop one important example of Christian wisdom, namely ‘thinking biblically’ as developed by Paul Ricoeur. This idea offers an alternative to neothomism’s predominantly rationalistic approach of God’s existence and its inability to respond to the existential questions of the seekers.

To start with, Ricoeur gives a nuanced assessment of the broad and tumultuous conceptual history that “consisted in conjoining God and Being, and whose impact lasted for over fifteen hundred years.”⁵ First of all, the translation of the original Hebrew text of Exodus 3:14 into Greek and then Latin linked the original text in an enduring manner to a metaphysical tradition, stemming from Plato and Aristotle and continuing until the present day. Thus, this translation contributed in a decisive way to the intellectual and spiritual identity of the Christian West.⁶ But this long tradition of *conjoining* God and being did not bring any of the Church fathers and the great Scholastics to *confuse* God’s direct revelation in Exodus 3:14 with a philosophical speculation about Being, or to think that this speculation would reveal to human reason the mystery of the divine essence in the intimacy of its innermost nature. Phrased positively, all pre-modern philosophers and theologians considered the delicate balance between the apophatic tradition, according to which we cannot affirm anything about God, and the tradition of analogy, which holds that Being can be spoken of in affirmative statements, as the frame of reference in their thinking about God.

However, modern philosophy and neothomism in particular upset this delicate balance. Ricoeur shows this by giving a critical analysis of what Gilson called the ‘metaphysics of Exodus’, according to which “Exodus lays down the principle from which Christian

³ See John Kekes, *Wisdom*. In: *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20, 3, 1983, 277-286.

⁴ R. Nozick, *What is Wisdom and Why do Philosophers Love it so?* In: *Idem, The examined Life. Philosophical Meditations*. New York, Touchstone Press, 1989, 273. Several authors deplore the fact that, since modernity, the tension between theoretical, detached knowledge and life-oriented, engaged love has widened to a complete rift, which has obviously gone at the cost of the more holistic idea of wisdom. See: David Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 269-271; Brenda Almond, *Seeking Wisdom*. In: *Philosophy* 72, 281, 1997, 423-428; Daniel Kaufman, *Knowledge, Wisdom, and the Philosopher*. In: *Philosophy* 81, 1, 2006, 129-151.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *From Interpretation to Translation*. In: André LaCoque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically. Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 356.

⁶ Therefore, it would be naïve to think that exegesis could coincide, without the mediation of a tradition of reading, with the original signification of the text of Exodus, even with the presumed intention of its author. Cfr. Paul Ricoeur, *From Interpretation to Translation*, p. 332.

philosophy will be suspended.”⁷ This illustrates Gilson’s claim that philosophy, in particular (neothomist) ontology, naturally agrees with Christian faith. Neothomism’s stress on the natural character of this agreement is substantiated by the fact that it attached a far greater importance to the proofs of God’s existence than Thomas Aquinas himself had done, and consequently, not only claimed to know *that* God is, but also *what* he is. This shows that neothomism failed to do justice to the apophatic tradition that had been dear to Aquinas.⁸

In contrast to contemporary post-metaphysical philosophers, like Heidegger, Levinas, and Marion, according to whom it is an aberration to think that Being is the proper name of God and that this name designates God’s very essence,⁹ Ricoeur takes a more nuanced position in this debate: he admits that “the rapprochement between the God of the Scriptures and the Being of the philosophers remains historically contingent and speculatively fragile.”¹⁰ It is contingent because nothing in Greek thought pointed to a fusion of God and Being. Moreover, this rapprochement is also speculatively fragile, because the difference between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Pascal) remains insurmountable. The overall result is that “we find ourselves confronted with the nonphilosophical origin of God and his nonnecessity for philosophy.”¹¹ In contrast to the above mentioned post-metaphysical thinkers, Ricoeur accepts this rapprochement as a historical fact that has shaped the intellectual and spiritual identity of the Christian West. Hence, it cannot and should not simply be rejected, but needs to be reinterpreted.

In Ricoeur’s view, it is crucial for Christian faith that the philosophical communicability of the ‘wisdom for God’ is restored, which requires that the break between Exodus 3:14 and philosophical reason is reconsidered. Only then, the sapiential point of this Bible verse, and, more in general, its significance for Western culture can be preserved. Hence, he asks: “Why not assume that Exodus 3:14 was ready from the very beginning to add a new region of significance to the rich polysemy of the verb being, explored in other terms by the Greeks and their Muslim, Jewish and Christian heirs.”¹²

⁷ See: Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy (Gifford lectures 1931-1932)*. London, Sheed and Ward, 1936, p. 51. Quoted in: Paul Ricoeur, *From Interpretation to Translation*, p. 353.

⁸ Ricoeur notes, however, that in the *Summa* “the first question posed concerning God shifts attention to the ‘existential’ aspect of *esse*, as though the question of existence takes priority over that of the name.” See Paul Ricoeur, *From Interpretation to Translation*, p. 352.

⁹ Peter Jonkers, *God in France: Heidegger’s Legacy*. In: P. Jonkers and R. Welten (ed.), *God in France. Eight contemporary French Thinkers on God (Studies in Philosophical Theology, 28)*. Peeters, Leuven, Paris, Dudley MA, 2005, 1-42 ; Paul Ricoeur, *From Interpretation to Translation*, p. 355-359.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *From Interpretation to Translation*, p. 353. Ricoeur notes that Gilson, shortly before his death in 1978, admitted the contingency and fragility of this conjunction, although he still supported it almost half a century before. This shift in Gilson’s position is a clear illustration of neothomism’s decline in plausibility.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *From Interpretation to Translation*, p. 354.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *From Interpretation to Translation*, p. 341; see also p. 360.

In order to uncover the sapiential dimension of Exodus 3:14 Ricoeur starts with formulating some working hypotheses. The first one is that great religious texts express modes of thought that differ from philosophy and cannot be reduced to it, but nevertheless give rise to philosophical thinking. These texts belong to a kind of discourse that is not scientifically descriptive or explanatory, or even apologetic, argumentative, or dogmatic, but whose metaphorical language expresses profound wisdom.¹³ With this hypothesis Ricoeur not only takes distance from neothomism's natural agreement between metaphysics and Christian faith, but also from the post-metaphysical idea that the equation of God and being is an intellectual aberration. Instead, he encourages us to think in a sapiential way the revelation of God's name in relation to the verb being.

A second working hypothesis concerns the relation between the Scriptures and the historical communities of reading and interpretation. A hermeneutical circle imposes itself here: in interpreting its Scriptures the community in question interprets itself. A mutual election takes place here between those texts taken as foundational and the community that is founded by them. But this relation is also characterized by a fundamental asymmetry: the founding text *teaches* and the community *receives* instruction, which implies that, in this regard, faith is nothing other than the confession of this asymmetry. Readers and interpreters don't have to share the faith of this community, but if they want to enter this hermeneutical circle, they have to participate at least by way of imagination and sympathy in the act of adhesion by which the historical community recognizes itself as founded and comprised in and by this particular body of texts.¹⁴

Which, then, are the essential elements of a sapiential interpretation of Exodus 3:14? First of all, keeping in mind the polysemy of the verb 'being', we should guard against any ontological abstraction, or, more generally speaking, against any claim to intellectual mastery regarding this verb.¹⁵ God's self-presentation and the complementary recognition of his 'being' by the faithful form an asymmetrical pair, in which the one who presents himself holds the initiative, whereas the recognition implies a 'responsive' attitude. As tributaries of the apophatic tradition, medieval thinkers have heeded this warning against an (intellectual) appropriation of God's name far more than modern philosophy, including neothomism.

Guarding the interpretation of Exodus 3:14 from ontological abstraction does not sever, however, the relation between faith and reason. Hence, it is legitimate to reflect on Christian wisdom philosophically in order to make it understandable to others. The idea that that the metaphorical language of great religious texts expresses profound wisdom,

¹³ André LaCoque and Paul Ricoeur, Preface. In: Idem, *Thinking Biblically*, p. xvi.

¹⁴ André LaCoque and Paul Ricoeur, Preface. In: Idem, *Thinking Biblically*, p. xvi f.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, From Interpretation to Translation, p. 335.

giving rise to philosophical reflection, connects the narrative and the reflective dimension of religion. Thus, it contributes to bridge the well-known opposition between the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the God of the philosophers and scientists, but also that between Christian faith and the world of the seekers. So, faith should first of all be communicated through the Christian narrative and the wisdom that is embedded in it. Because this narrative is connected to a reflective tradition, it is possible to think it philosophically in order to rephrase this wisdom in a more conceptual way so that it, finally, can be linked to the existential questions of today's seekers, and gives them food for thought. Taken together, these three steps exemplify Christian wisdom as a hermeneutical process, which can be offered as an authentic and truthful orientation to the seekers who are willing to enter this hermeneutical circle themselves.

The insight that God's self-revelation always transcends its recognition and conceptualization by humans opens a hermeneutical space, thereby showing a further aspect of Christian wisdom: no instance, including the Church, may use his name in vain, e.g. by appropriating it, reducing it to a set of fixed doctrinal formulas. In other words, fulfilling the commandment to do God's will does not reduce humans to spiritual automates, but encourages them to seek what letting their lives be oriented by God requires from them in a concrete situation. Especially in times of radical pluralism in existential matters, every claim to infallible truth on doctrinal grounds is met with suspicion. In order to convince people of the existential truth of Christian faith, the idea of Christian wisdom as offering an authentic and truthful 'orientation in life' is far more attractive.

In order to further explain the hermeneutical nature of our orientation in existential matters, and hence of wisdom, I refer to Kant's essay on orientation.¹⁶ Every kind of orientation requires a subjective principle: to orientate oneself in moral, or more generally speaking, existential matters means "to be guided, in one's conviction of truth, by a subjective principle of reason where objective principles of reason are inadequate."¹⁷ This is so because we feel, on the one hand, an urgent (subjective) need to pass a true judgment about our life-orientations, while, on the other hand, we are painfully aware of the lack of objective knowledge that would make such a judgment univocally and universally true. In other words, to orientate oneself in moral matters is neither a matter of just doing whatever come to one's mind nor of objective science. So, the hermeneutical nature wisdom lies in the fact that it is situated between doctrinal dogmatism and a contingent opinion.¹⁸ This means that the idea of Christian wisdom

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, "Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren," *Werke in zehn Bänden. Band 5: Schriften zur Metaphysik und Logik*, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), pp. 267-283.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 270, footnote.

¹⁸ For an analysis of the implications of Kant's idea of orientation in existential matters for philosophy of religion, see Peter Jonkers, "Redefining Religious Truth as a Challenge for Philosophy of Religion," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. Vol. 4, 2012, pp. 139-159.

can be offered to the seekers as a plausible way out from their predicament of being caught between their gut feeling that all religions are contingent social constructions and their need for an authentic and truthful orientation in life.

Finally, “it seems reasonable to take the formula in Exodus 3:14 as an emphatic expansion of the self-presentation of God,” thereby creating “an exceptional hermeneutical situation, namely the opening to a plurality of interpretations of the verb [being] used here.”¹⁹ This plurality ranges from the evocation of the personal God of Israel to the manifold meanings of the notion of being. It is essential to keep this plurality in mind; it means that the revelation of God’s name belongs to a different order than a speculation on Being, although these two orders have been conjoined since the beginning of Christianity. Hence, the ontological speculation about the neuter Being should not obliterate the theological reflection about the first person expression of God’s name. From the perspective of Christian wisdom, this means that God remains first of all someone to whom we can pray, and someone whom we believe hears our prayers. In order to do justice to this idea, a paraphrastic translation of Exodus 3:14 is needed. In this context, Ricoeur refers to the one proposed by the modern Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig, for whom this paraphrase serves to underscore the shift from the neuter to the first person and, thus, from theoretical speculation to Christian wisdom.²⁰ Rosenzweig’s translation does not identify God with eternal Being, or even with the existent, but with the existing (*der Daseiende*), present to the Dasein of human beings. Such a paraphrastic translation of Exodus 3:14 does “not convey a complete break with the verb *Sein*, but rather another extension of its polysemy.”²¹ But, at the same time, underscoring God as a person and, thus, closely relating him to the lives of human beings, highlights the sapiential dimension of Christian faith and offers the seekers of our times an authentic and true companion who orients their lives.

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¹⁹ Ricoeur, “From Interpretation to Translation,” p. 336, 337.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 360f. As a translation of Exodus 3:14, Rosenzweig suggests: “Ich werde dasein, als der ich dasein werde... ICH BIN DA schickt mich zu euch.“

²¹ Ibid., p. 361.