

WHY THINKING IN FAITH? A REAPPRAISAL OF EDITH STEIN'S VIEW OF REASON

TEREZA-BRINDUSA PALADE

NSPSPA, Bucharest

Abstract. This paper intends to question the conventional wisdom that philosophy should limit its endeavours to the horizon of modern transcendentalism, thus rejecting the presuppositions of faith. By reappraising Edith Stein's views of faith and reason, which are also shared by the magisterial document of John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, an argument for the possibility of "thinking in faith" is put forward. But why would it be important nowadays to engage in rational research in philosophy in a quest for truth which also draws its inspiration from faith? First of all, as I shall argue, because the two great modern transcendental projects, namely the Kantian and the Husserlian one, which were both in tune with Spinoza's project to liberate philosophical reason from theology, have failed. Secondly, because "faith" (*fides*) is not based on "irrational sentiments", but is "intellectual understanding", as Edith Stein argues. Third, because the natural light of the created intellect is, as was shown by St. Thomas Aquinas, a participated likeness of the supernatural light of the uncreated divine intellect. Therefore, even the natural philosopher gets their own light from the eternal Truth of faith. Finally, by following another Thomistic stance, one may argue that the end of human life is an intelligible one: the contemplation of God. In order to attain this end, the human being should endeavour to attain as much as is possible, in an intelligible way, the thing desired. Even if the philosophical inquiry has its own limits, it may however sustain such progress towards the end of human life.

DISLOYAL REASON: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

What can be the significance of *thinking in faith* today, in an era in which all theoretical thinking that neglects immediate usefulness is seen as quasi-superfluous, and in which, on the other hand, Christian faith and religious faith in general are widely associated with irrationalism and mythology?

The current lack of prestige of both philosophy and faith seems to be caused by the fact that, unlike *liberty* and *justice*, values recognized by

contemporary society, the value of *truth* is seriously undermined by the legitimacy of many subjective creeds, belief-systems and ideologies. In the postmodern culture of today, pervaded by relativism as it is, rational thinking is hardly seen as “a quest for truth”. As for faith, it is usually perceived as a mere subjective phenomenon, a human relation with a comforting deity who, if at all existent, is fitted to the emotional and moral sensibility of each religious believer. This mentality is shaped by the pragmatist conception of truth and religion which emphasizes only the practical utility of an opportune “truth” and the utility of “religious experience” for satisfying human emotional needs.

However, in all historical times there were philosophers who believed that knowledge is an end in itself and that by theoretical contemplation the mind can approach the truth that is proper to *being* (*to on, esse*), that is, to the underlying reality which is beyond mere appearance. Thales, Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Boethius, St. Anselm of Canterbury, St. Thomas Aquinas, Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein – all of them shared, although in different ways, this belief in the cognitive capacity of human reason.

On the other hand, the objectivity of faith and the value of the light of faith for human knowledge and for scientific research were recognized by great scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, and others. For discovering *what really is* in nature and in the physical universe, the scientist might have not only an inquisitive mind, but also “a religious attitude” ennobled by the humility of faith. Even those scientists who believed in a pantheistic deity, like Einstein for example, reasserted at least “the God of philosophers” who besides Spinoza’s rationalist God, is also the Greek *logos* who created the mysterious harmony of the physical universe – the same *logos* taken by early Christian theology as conveying much of the Christian understanding of God, in the pagan world.

Yet, in early modernity it was precisely a rationalist believer in “the God of philosophers” like Spinoza who proposed, in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), a sharp separation of “faith from Philosophy” (Spinoza 1925, pp.173-174). In Spinoza’s challenging view, faith has to do only with a piety that is equated with irrationalism and superstition and with an obedience grounded on fear, whereas “reason is the domain of truth and wisdom” (Spinoza 1925, p. 184). In reducing faith to credulity and piety to bigotry, Spinoza adopted something of the critique of religion made by Epicurus, according to which the worship of gods originated in fear and ignorance, whereas only philosophy and reason may lead to wisdom (*sapientia*) and, thus, to a happy and perfect life, in harmony with nature. In

the 17th century, Hobbes shared this view of religious faith. Spinoza recognized, however, that religion can be useful to society, though not because it is truthful, but because it may cause people to behave well (Spinoza 1925, p. 176). Here Spinoza is rather close to Machiavelli's case for a politically established religion that can maintain civic virtue (see Machiavelli 1998, pp. 139-152).

So, according to Spinoza's influential view, the subjectivism and irrationalism of faith would be opposed to the wisdom acquired by a reason liberated from theology. Thus, only an autonomous reason may possess the truth, whereas theology has to do only with obedience and action, since many of its tenets have not "even a shadow of the truth" (Spinoza 1925, p. 176).

Over the last two centuries, the two great transcendental projects that aimed at founding the whole of knowledge only on the grounds of the immanent, created reason, that is the Kantian and the Husserlian transcendentalism, have failed. After following, in modernity, the path of the total autonomy of reason in relation to faith, as recommended by Spinoza, the subjective transcendental reason has proved its tragic deficiency. It has lost not only the view of its creator, who is the creator of the entire universe, but also the grounds of its own cognitive capacity. After Nietzsche and Heidegger, philosophical reason has led only to the confusion of relativism and to the hopelessness of nihilism. Since this process has seriously betrayed our inner demand to search for the truth, it now seems that only a philosophical thinking in faith may enlarge the dimensions of the limited philosophical rationality to which we have arrived in modernity.

The main question of this paper is, therefore, why would it be meaningful to resort nowadays to a philosophy which takes seriously the horizons of faith. To answer this query, I shall rely primarily on Edith Stein's understanding of knowledge, reason and faith and on Pope John Paul II's Catholic document, *Fides et ratio*.

FAITH, REASON AND TRUTH FOR EDITH STEIN

Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) (1891-1942) was a Jewish-German philosopher trained at Breslau and Göttingen. She was Husserl's student at Göttingen and became his assistant at Freiburg. In 1933, 12 years after her conversion to Christianity, she entered the Carmelite monastery in Köln. Later on, trying to protect her from the Holocaust, her superiors sent her to the Carmelite monastery in Echt (Holland), but in August 1942 she

was deported at Auschwitz-Birkenau and exterminated. She was canonized in 1998 and proclaimed co-patron saint of Europe in 1999, by Pope John Paul II.

Those who have tried to grasp the substance of her life agreed that this can be identified with her faithful *passion for truth*. For Edith Stein, the dignity of a human being consists in her being a *Wahrheitsucher* (one who is searching for the truth), which for her is synonymous with a *Gottsucher* (one who is searching for God) (see Paolinelli 2001, pp. 60-61; Palade 2008, pp. 89-91).

Edith Stein was converted to the Christian faith during the summer of 1921, while she was staying with her friends, the spouses Conrad-Martius, at their house in Bergzabern (Hedwig Conrad-Martius was also a philosopher and a disciple of Husserl's). The decisive moment of Edith Stein's conversion to Christianity apparently was her reading of the autobiography of St Teresa of Ávila, which she took „by chance” from the library of her friends. She suddenly discovered that the whole truth that she was seeking from her adolescence „was there”, in the relationship of faith of St. Teresa with Christ. „The truth is here!”, she reportedly exclaimed after she finished reading the book.

After her conversion, although she honestly recognized the limits of the natural knowledge of philosophy and believed that the first and ultimate truth, i.e. the supernatural divine truth, is the object of faith rather than that of natural philosophy, she pursued her philosophical research. After entering the monastery, her superiors encouraged her to dedicate her spare time to work in order to continue her previous research. As an enclosed nun, Edith Stein wrote, *inter alia*, her large philosophical treatise on *being*, *Endliches und ewiges Sein (Finite and eternal being)* – a more elaborated version of her previous work *Akt und Potenz (Act and potentiality)* and *Kreuzeswissenschaft (Scientia Crucis)*, the phenomenology of the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross which was left unfinished when she was arrested, in August 1942.

Edith Stein believed that contemplation and prayer cannot deprive natural philosophy of its value. On the contrary, faith can throw a light – a supernatural one – on thinking. On the other hand, she believed that even the feeble light of the natural reason can prevent Christians from going astray and losing themselves in darkness – in the darkness that is also present on the way of faith. Edith Stein thus found her additional Christian vocation, besides devoting herself to prayer and contemplation in the monastery, in cultivating a „theocentric” philosophy, based on a „supernatural reason” that is illuminated by faith.

Now, those who are familiar with Aquinas's views on faith and reason would not readily agree to this "mixture" between philosophy and theology. For St Thomas, "philosophical science" is "built up by human reason", whereas the "sacred doctrine [is] learned through revelation" (*The Summa Theologica* I, q. 1, a. 1.). So, there is no admixture between the knowledge of the truth by natural reason, which is natural philosophy, and the sacred doctrine based upon the Scriptures, which reveals truths that exceed human reason, and should be accepted by faith.

Nonetheless, Edith Stein, who had assimilated the writings of St. Thomas, does not question the legitimacy of the separate subjects of philosophy and theology and is not, on the other hand, interested in reconciling them. What she has in view is rather the original vocation of philosophy, as a desire for and a search for wisdom. Since after the Christian revelation wisdom has been identified with the person of Jesus of Nazareth, she believed that philosophical reflection should enlarge its horizons by regarding the truth communicated by revelation, though not in order to become a new theology, but to aim, with its own powers, at the sovereign and first truth that is God himself (*The Summa Theologica* I, q.16, a. 5). A "theocentric philosophy" is thus a rigorous rational quest for truth that has elevated its goal to the knowledge of God, that is to the final cause of reality and of human existence.

For Edith Stein, as for St. Thomas, faith is clearly distinguished from reason, and the light of faith is differentiated from the natural light of reason. But since both faith and reason aim at the knowledge of truth, they have, arguably, at least this common vocation for truth.

To understand better the closeness of faith and reason for Edith Stein, we should remember that she distinguished Christian faith (*fides*) from a "religion of sentiment". In 1925, she wrote in a letter to her friend, the philosopher Roman Ingarden (another former disciple of Husserl) that, far from being an irrational religion, Christianity deals with the question of truth (which also regards life and the heart) (Stein 1991, p. 168). In 1931, she pointed out in a conference that "faith is not an object of phantasy, or a pious sentiment, but is intellectual understanding (even if not rational penetration), adhesion of the will to the eternal truth" (Stein 1993, p. 196).¹

Faith is thus seen by Edith Stein as directed to truth as to its object. She believes that faith has in common with knowledge (*Wissen*) and with

¹ I am using here the German edition of *Edith Steins Werke* (Edith Stein's Works); the English translation of all relevant quotations is my own.

the intellectual vision (*Einsicht*) the certitude of a truth that is grasped by intellectual intuition. In this sense, faith is different from doubt or opinion, which lack such a certitude. But, in another sense, faith is different from a mere theoretical belief, because it involves a personal trust in one who is unchangeable and totally trustworthy. The truth of faith is, therefore, different from the truth of reason, because the former involves the whole being of the believer, and moves his will to the adhesion of faith, unlike the latter which is only partially convincing and may not move the will towards God. But, given this difference between faith and reason, and between the truth of faith and the truth of reason, how is it possible, again, to philosophize *in faith*?

THINKING IN FAITH

In her article "Der Intellekt und die Intellektuellen", originally published in 1931, Edith Stein points out the main characteristic of what could be understood by "thinking in faith". First, she describes the intellect as a divine gift that is necessary to us, in a way similar to St. Thomas, who sees the (active) intellect as a light that allows us to make intelligible the singular objects (Stein 1987, p. 116). For St. Thomas, as for Edith Stein, this light is "nothing else than a participated likeness of the uncreated light" (see *The Summa Theologica* I q. 84, a. 5). So, the natural light of the created intellect is a participated likeness of the supernatural light of the uncreated divine intellect.

But, as Edith Stein adds, the intellect should become aware of its own limits and gain, therefore, the virtue of humility. The prevailing tendency of intellectuals who rely only on the natural capacity of their intellect is to become self-assured and even presumptuous. But this attitude overshadows the real limits of the intellect. Nonetheless, it can be questioned and reversed when the natural intellect is confronted with the supreme and ultimate truths. Then, after seeing that our natural knowledge is usually only a fragmentary one (*Stückwerk*), the intellectual pride normally gets dissolved.

After gaining this awareness as to its own limits, there are, according to Edith Stein, two possibilities for the intellect: either it turns upside down in despair, or it recognizes with humility that the divine, inscrutable truth cannot be approached without the supplementary light that comes from faith, since faith can enhance the natural capacity of the intellect.

In Edith Stein's view, "the supreme and ultimate truths are not revealed by virtue of the human intellect alone" (Stein 1987, p. 116). On the other hand, the intellectual should not surrender, *qua* intellectual, since the sphere of the natural activity of the intellect has its own legitimacy. But he should perform his work "as the farmer cultivates his own land, which is good and useful, but is nevertheless confined within strict limits, like any other human work" (Stein 1987, pp. 117).

"Thinking in faith" is thus a human activity which may receive an inspiration from the light of faith, although it should not surpass the methodological boundaries of philosophy and turn into a theology. If the theses of the sacred doctrine are based on the theological principles, that is on the articles of faith, the arguments used by philosophy should be taken from the principles that are discovered by reason (*The Summa Theologica* I, q. 1, a. 8).

This autonomy of natural reason from theology has also been reasserted by the Encyclical *Fides et ratio* (1998). But John Paul II praises too the wise reason that stands before Revelation, by being opened towards the mystery of faith. This wise reason is the same as Edith Stein's humble reason, which receives an additional light from the truth of faith.

In 2008, when the tenth anniversary of the Encyclical *Fides et ratio* was celebrated, Pope Benedict XVI significantly encouraged a relaunching of philosophical studies in universities and schools. In his address to the participants at the Sixth European Symposium for university professors held in Rome in June 2008, he explicitly invited philosophers to assume a more courageous anthropological research that has in view the cultural context of modernity, and to conduct their reflection both on the real situation of the human being in our times and on ontology and metaphysics. He added that in order to *enlarge* the horizons of rationality, philosophical research should give up its rationalist self-sufficiency. Since in more recent philosophy some authors give credit to religion and, in particular, to Christianity, there are signs, as Pope Benedict stresses, that there is a sincere desire among contemporary philosophers to give up the old presumption of modern philosophy and move towards the mystery of religion (Benedict XVI 2008).

This new encounter of the horizon of philosophical research with that of theology was explicitly recommended ten years ago by *Fides et ratio* and was previously envisaged by Edith Stein. Without a humble recognition of its own limits and without a reverence for mystery, reason has proved its insufficiency, especially after the complete Kantian separation of philosophy from theology. From the Kantian epistemological modesty,

modern and contemporary philosophers (except for Hegel and the Hegelians, who took the train in the opposite direction by divinizing the human intelligence) have become increasingly sceptical, agnostic, pragmatist and relativist – with the ultimate result of adopting the postmodern official metaphysics of nihilism, since the answer given by Heidegger to the query *What is Metaphysics?* was an ontological agreement with the existence of a fundamental *nothingness*.

Furthermore, without a more widely shared belief in the objectivity of truth and without a quest for truth in natural philosophy even theology, the sacred doctrine based on divine revelation, may lose its human support. This philosophical indifference as regards the truth is quite harmful, since, without the support of natural reason, theology itself is often seen as sheer mythology.

But to tackle ultimate questions and embark on metaphysical research one needs a courage or a magnanimity that can be nourished only by faith. Such questions are usually left aside by contemporary analytic philosophy, on the one hand, as "too vague" to be grasped by our language and by continental philosophy, on the other hand, as contradicting the official metaphysical doctrine of *nothingness*. But, even if courage is required, a necessary precondition of such a metaphysical research is, as Edith Stein has emphasized, the virtue of humility.

THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

According to St. Thomas, the virtue of humility is part of modesty or temperance. Humility moderates the impetuosity of a passionate hope that is usually driven by pride: "Just as meekness suppresses the movement of anger, so does humility suppress the movement of hope, which is the movement of a spirit aiming at great things" (*The Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 161, a. 4).

As we have seen, without a magnanimous spirit that aims at great things, one cannot start metaphysical research. However, an immoderate spirit that "propels itself to find the supreme and ultimate truths" and relies only on its own powers conveys rather an inordinate desire for its own excellence, which is the very definition of pride (*The Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 162, a. 2). Pride has pushed modern philosophers to proclaim the self-sufficiency of reason, thus projecting on faith the suspicion of irrationality. And an immoderate courage of reason may lead not only to audacity, as Aristotle has shown in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, but also to the

myopia of human intelligence. The self-sufficient reason that ignores the mystery of faith could not safely approach the truths of metaphysics – it is rather tempted to confine itself to subjective truths, trying to pass them off for essential truths.

But if the human intellect is humble, it may receive in faith what could not be seized by the natural activity of the intellect. "The knowledge proper to faith does not destroy the mystery; it only reveals it more, showing how important it is for people's life" (John Paul II 1998, no. 13). The truth that the human intelligence may receive from faith is more than a simple "truth of reason". It is the truth that illuminates the entire human life, and, therefore, also the human intelligence, despite its "finiteness before the infinite mystery of God" (John Paul II 1998, no. 14).

That truth is in fact the ultimate and the universal truth – it is the fullness of the mystery of God that is concealed: "It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out" (*Proverbs* 25:2). The highest nobility of human beings thus consists in exploring the truth of God also with their reason, following the yearning desire for knowledge of the human heart (John Paul II 1998, no. 17).

The recognition of the fact that the ultimate truth searched for by reason is the mystery of God requires, again, humility and reverence. Otherwise, the search of reason may become immoderate and proud, yielding a discouragement which is but false humility, or a "grievous pride", as St. Augustine calls it. A reason that pretends to be humble by embracing absolute scepticism, agnosticism and relativism shows only a false self-abasement. True humility means, on the contrary, the correct attitude of reason before the mystery, described by Edith Stein as follows: "before the inscrutable truth it bows down in worship and humbly receives in faith what could not be seized by the natural activity of the intellect" (Stein 1987, p. 116), while not turning upside down in despair and surrender to scepticism.

"Thinking in faith" is thus possible, thanks to a true humility that is consistent with a magnanimous spirit. If faith is understood as a search for truth that is not simply *irrational*, but engages the whole human being, including her cognitive capacity, the desire for knowledge arising and fueled by faith may also stimulate the philosophical reason to approach eternal truths, as far as this is possible. Since the desire of the human heart for knowledge is universal, a philosophical reflection nourished by the mystery of faith would also be meaningful in our time, although it should not depart from the current real situation of men and women in our contemporary culture. A philosophical thinking in faith, and especially in the Christian faith, which is meant to be imparted to "all nations" (*Luke* 24:47), is, therefore,

worth engaging in nowadays for at least two reasons: because the human desire for knowledge is invariable and because the ultimate truth sought by the human heart is primarily the object of faith and religion.

THE STRUGGLE WITH THE ANGEL AND THE FINALITY OF HUMAN THOUGHT

Two souls dwell, alas! in my breast.
J. W. von Goethe

Faith may thus impel a Christian believer to try to answer by his natural reason the ultimate questions of human life and reality, that is, the most important metaphysical questions. Moreover, faith offers metaphysical intuitions and may inflame the desire to explore philosophical queries. In his treatise *Monologion*, the philosopher and theologian St. Anselm of Canterbury tries to *understand* by reason and natural theology not only how the existence of God can be argued for, but also which are the divine attributes, and even what is the divine essence (Anselm 1996). The same metaphysical questions about the essence of God and the divine attributes reappear in the meditations of St. Maria Faustina Kowalska, surprisingly enough, as she was a young Sister who only studied for a few years at an elementary school (Maria Faustina Kowalska 2005, 30). And perhaps St. Anselm himself, in spite of his philosophical learning, would not have formulated this query without his *Credo* and his Christian faith.

It seems that it is the human heart that is longing for God with a desire arising from faith that strongly wishes to know God in his very essence. Although the essence of God is unfathomable and incomprehensible by a created intellect, it is this mystery that provides the true finality of human thought.

This finality could only be reached, according to St. Thomas and to the doctrine of the Church, through the beatific vision of the blessed in heaven, who are made "deiform" (*The Summa Theologica* I, q. 12, a. 5). Nevertheless, in order to receive the "crown of justice" (2 *Timothy* 4:8) in heaven, human reason should have the courage to engage during the life on earth in a struggle with the angel (*Genesis*, 32:24-26). Since the end of human life is an intelligible one (*The Summa Theologica* II-I, q. 4, a.3), that is, the contemplation of the most desirable and supreme object of love, that is God Himself, the human being should endeavour even now to attain in an intelligible way the thing desired, as much as is possible. To receive the fi-

nal blessing that the angel gave to Jacob (*Genesis* 32, 29), the human mind should thus confront the ultimate questions related to God and to human existence, without losing sight of its finality and leaving the battlefield. The human intelligence should thus keep vivid those ultimate questions, unless it wants to fall prey to the pervasive pragmatism of our culture or to the ideologies and idolatries of our time.

Thinking in faith is thus the most important and perhaps the most difficult mission of philosophy today. It is the mission to preserve the finality of human thought, while engaging with true humility and courage in its own struggle with the angel, that is with the philosophical queries that start from the inner demands of our modern culture. Those questions should not be evaded, as often happens, but followed and raised to the light of an ontological and metaphysical reflection. If we consistently follow the way opened by the question "what is the finality of our modern human life?", even in an era of technology and global communication, we may ourselves arrive at metaphysical queries about the underlying principle of reality that unifies our goals and our complex experiences. While our answer might differ from St. Anselm's, we need to follow as well the ultimate intelligible end of our life. In addition, our own struggle with the angel requires us to discover some unexplored ways to approach the mystery of the eternal being and the mystery of human existence in the light of faith.

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