

# Étienne Gilson: Three Stages and Two Modes of His Christian Philosophy

*James D. Capehart*

**ABSTRACT** In this paper, I demarcate the three main stages of development of Étienne Gilson's doctrine concerning Christian philosophy through an examination of some of his key works, treated in chronological order. Thus, I proceed to explicate how Gilson's doctrine developed from its gestational stage in the 1920s, through the first Christian philosophy debate of the 1930s, into its second phase of birth and infancy from the 1930s through the early 1950s, ending with its third period, that of maturity, in the later 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, I note that implicit throughout those three stages are conceptions of Christian philosophy as existing in two modes: one as the philosophical component present within theology, and the other as, properly speaking, outside of theology—though by no means outside of the influence of Christianity. Additionally, Gilson's influence upon St. John Paul II's treatment of Christian philosophy in *Fides et Ratio* is addressed. The paper culminates in a demonstration of how Gilson's mature doctrine regarding Christian philosophy is relevant as a guide for the pursuit of Christian philosophy in this, our Third Christian Millennium.

**KEYWORDS** *amicus theologiae*; *ancilla theologiae*; faith; *Fides et Ratio*; Gilson, Étienne; John Paul II; problem of Christian philosophy; reason

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Originally occasioned by a conference addressing the topic of “Christian Philosophy: Its Past, Present, and Future,” it is most appropriate in this essay to delve into the thought of one of the truly great Christian philosophers of the twentieth century, Étienne Gilson, as he was someone who not only produced much of what would rightly be termed Christian philosophy, but was also at the forefront of defending the validity of the phrase. Indeed, Gilson is synonymous with the expressions “Christian philosophy” and “Christian philosopher,” because he was at the frontlines of sketching out what the “problem” was, and of defending a proper usage of those phrases. For some, to say “Christian philosophy” was as contradictory as talking of a “squared circle,” or at least as confusing and unhelpful as Christian Lego-building. Can there be a philosophy which has Christianity as some kind of essential characteristic? Would it not just necessarily become Christian theology, given any kind of substantial Christian influence? Or worse, would it be some kind of monster, where theology and philosophy and faith and reason improperly merge to create some hybrid creature of intellectual destruction—a new kind of theologico-philosophical Godzilla wreaking havoc on the edifices of theology and philosophy alike?

Gilson specifically began using the phrase in the early 1920s, as it was in common parlance, and had been for centuries without any fanfare or concern.<sup>1</sup> This changed in 1928 when the French Rationalist philosopher Émile Bréhier began the controversy with his lecture series titled “Y a-t-il une philosophie chrétienne?” In it, Bréhier famously denies the possibility of Christian philosophy, remarking that there can no more be a Christian philosophy than there can be a Christian physics or mathematics (see Bréhier 1931, 127).<sup>2</sup> To say that Gilson disagreed would be an understatement. Nevertheless, to explain exactly what Gilson taught about Christian

1. Two excellent summaries of the history of the term and also of the development of the Christian philosophy debates of the 1930’s in France are contained in the following: Gregory Sadler *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation: The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates in France* (2011, 10–96) and Maurice Nédoncelle *Is there a Christian Philosophy?* (1960, 15–99). As a general reference point, when the debates began in the late 1920s, two general positions emerged, with Rationalists such as Émile Bréhier denying the validity of the phrase, but Catholic thinkers such as Gilson, Jacques Maritain, and Maurice Blondel defending its legitimacy. By the early 1930s, the Rationalists had fallen out of the debates, but Gilson and Maritain had new opponents, *viz.* fellow Thomists such as Fernand van Steenberghe of Louvain and the Dominican Pierre Mandonnet.

2. “We have seen Christianity’s attempts, always vain, to fix on one of these moments in order to appropriate it, but one can no more speak of a Christian philosophy than of a Christian mathematics or a Christian physics” (Bréhier 2011, 127) (Sadler translation).

philosophy—a notion which he wrote about for nearly half a century—would be like trying to grab a river as it flowed. Not to say that Gilson was imprecise or inconsistent. On the contrary, I hope to show that he was very consistent and followed his principles where they necessarily led with a similar power to that of the analogy of the flowing river. Due to this fact, Gilson’s doctrine concerning Christian philosophy consistently and methodically developed and matured. The best metaphor to describe it would be to liken it to a human being with a period of 1) gestation, 2) birth and early development, and 3) final growth into maturity. With this extended analogy in mind, I would like to present the thought of Étienne Gilson on Christian philosophy according to three stages: from (1) its gestational stage in the 1920s and through the first Christian philosophy debate of the early 1930s, to (2) its second stage of birth and infancy from the Gifford Lectures of the early 1930s through to the early 1950s, and (3) ending with a third stage, that of maturity, from the late 1950s through the 1960s. Thus, I will demarcate these three main stages of the development of Gilson’s doctrine concerning Christian philosophy through an examination of some of his most important works from this fifty-year period, especially as regards his thought about the relationship of Christianity and philosophy, of faith and reason, and of theology and philosophy. While elucidating this development over these three stages, I aim to show that Gilson’s Christian philosophy should be conceived as existing in two possible modes: viz. Christian philosophy as *ancilla theologiae* employed within Christian theology by a philosophizing Christian theologian for a theological end, and Christian philosophy as *amicus theologiae* employed outside of Christian theology proper by a Christian philosopher for sub-theological ends, but very much still influenced by Christian revelation and grace (see Bloomer 2001, 306).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Gilson’s influence upon St. John Paul II’s treatment

3. In the referenced text, Bloomer notes that Armand Maurer, the Gilsonian disciple and translator, also spoke of two modes of Christian philosophy in Gilson’s thought, one within philosophy proper and one as a philosophical component within theology. See Armand Maurer’s *translator’s introduction to Christian Philosophy: An Introduction* by Étienne Gilson (1993, xvii–xx). The controversy that develops in the latter half of what I am calling Gilson’s second stage with regard to Christian philosophy is whether Gilson still regarded Christian philosophy as something that could be done by a philosopher as such, or whether it was only done by philosophizing theologians. I hope to show, through textual exegesis, that while Gilson in his later works focused heavily upon Christian philosophy as the philosophical component employed by the philosophizing theologian, he still held to the possibility of a Christian philosophy employed for ends proper to a philosopher. See Fernand van Steenberghen’s *The Philosophical Movement in the Thirteenth Century* (1955) for a position that highlights the controversy insofar as Steenberghen was responding to and rejecting Gilson’s theological turn. It should also be noted that John F. Wippel’s 1984 essay, “Thomas Aquinas and the Problem of

of Christian philosophy in *Fides et Ratio* will be noted as a way of pointing towards how Christian philosophy should continue to be pursued in the twenty-first century and beyond.<sup>4</sup>

With these points in mind, let us proceed to Gilson's first stage as regards Christian philosophy: his Christian philosophy in gestation. During this stage, he focused on finding Christian philosophical doctrines common to multiple thinkers of the Christian Middle Ages. In other words, if this kind of doctrine existed, he wanted to show what it looked like, and what essential characteristics it had that earned it the right to be called "Christian."

## 2. STAGE 1: GILSON'S CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY IN GESTATION, 1924–31

In the ensuing section, I will focus upon key works by Gilson on Saints Bonaventure, Thomas, and Augustine, proceeding chronologically from 1924 to 1931, ending this section with Gilson's essay at the first Christian philosophy debate at the *Societe française de Philosophie* meeting in March 1931.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.1. *St. Bonaventure as a Christian philosopher: Christian philosophy as a Vague Notion (from The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure, 1924)*

We begin this section with a brief treatment of a key text from Gilson's 1924 work, *La philosophie de saint Bonaventure* (Gilson 1938).<sup>6</sup> In the final chapter—titled "The Spirit of Bonaventure"—Gilson provides the closest thing to a definition of Christian philosophy that we find in this early work. In context, Gilson is explaining that, despite the differences in their specific philosophies, what unites St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas is precisely

Christian Philosophy" (1984, 24–33) also makes note of and rejects Gilson's theological turn with regard to Christian philosophy.

4. I would like to cite my own currently unpublished dissertation *Étienne Gilson and the First Two Stages of His Christian Philosophy* (2018) as a major influence on the current paper. In that work, I demarcate the three stages of Gilson's Christian philosophy in the same three ways, but only treat the first two stages substantially, making note of the third stage briefly in the concluding chapter and also pointing towards its influence upon St. John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*. I also highlight the distinction between these two modes of Christian philosophy in Gilson's thought.

5. This is the same manner in which I have organized my own treatment of the first stage in the above-mentioned *Étienne Gilson and the First Two Stages of His Christian Philosophy* (see Capehart 2018, 74–203).

6. Étienne Gilson, 1924, *La philosophie de saint Bonaventure* (Paris: J. Vrin), trans. by Dom Illtyd Trethowan and F.J. Sheed as *The Philosophy of Saint Bonaventure* (New York and London: Sheed and Ward, 1938). All subsequent citations and page references for this work are taken from the 1938 Trethowan and Sheed English edition.

the fact that they are Christian philosophies, and he demarcates four key characteristics of that commonality:

As against pantheism both of them teach creation from nothing and maintain that the gulf is infinite between absolute Being and contingent. As against ontologism, both deny explicitly that God can be seen at all by the human mind in this life, and *a fortiori* they deny that habitual knowledge of God which ontologism attributes to us. As against fideism, they both set the most thorough effort of the intellect to prove the existence of God and interpret the data of faith. As against rationalism, both co-ordinate the effort of the intellect with the act of faith and maintain the beneficent influence of the habit of faith upon the operations of the intellect. (Gilson 1938, 494)

The first element of Christian philosophy he notes is the commonality of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. All Christian thinkers know this teaching by means of revelation, but then can subsequently reason about it and develop it either within their theologies or within their philosophies. While for the Christian the ordinary course of coming to this teaching initially is by means of revelation, Gilson gives no evidence here in this text that he regards the doctrine of creation to be an article of faith, as Christian thinkers can treat this doctrine qua philosopher, as he is here maintaining.<sup>7</sup>

The second element concerns human knowledge about God. Christian philosophy rejects the doctrine of ontologism which held that the Divine essence is the primary object of the human intellect. A Christian philosopher in the vein of St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure will always be some sort of realist—even allowing for various epistemological accounts as regards that realism, whether that be by means of a doctrine of abstraction or one of illumination—that accepts the validity of sensory knowledge

7. This was such an early phase of Gilson's thinking about Christian philosophy that certain controversies in his works had not yet materialized. One of these that I will mention is whether the doctrine of creation is, for Gilson, an *article of faith*—that is, a truth about God and salvation which is *de iure* beyond reason's capacity to attain without the aid of revelation and so something that has been revealed—or a *preamble of faith*—a truth about God and salvation which, while *de iure* attainable by unaided human reason, is *de facto* so difficult to attain that God, in his mercy, has deigned also to reveal it. Gilson will come to show later in his career that *creatio ex nihilo* is so fundamentally Judeo-Christian that he does not believe that any pagan philosopher, including Aristotle, has ever truly attained this doctrine. Still, the fact that the Christian philosopher can investigate and develop the doctrine *as a philosophical principle of his Christian philosophy* entails that it must be, for Gilson, a properly rational object of investigation, and thus in this case, because it has in fact also been revealed, is a *preamble of faith*. See Bloomer (2001, 33) for a discussion of how *premables of faith* are sources of philosophical reflection in Gilson's understanding of Christian philosophy.

as the foundation of all human knowing. This element logically connects with the third element noted above, because for Gilson, Christian philosophers will build upon that valid knowledge, rooted in some way in the senses, to prove things about God, including his existence. Thus, while also revealed, such knowledge is in principle capable of philosophical proof. This is a complete rejection of fideism, which contends that all objects of knowledge about God and salvation are properly articles of faith. In short, Christian philosophy will always maintain a robust philosophy about the preambles of faith. The fourth and final element he lists above refers to the fact that the Christian philosopher philosophizes from the standpoint of the existential status of one who has suffered the effects of original sin but has been healed both by grace and faith. Faith and grace are beneficent to the intellect of the philosopher and help him to work out his philosophy all the better.

However, while pregnant with principles regarding Christian philosophy that Gilson will maintain to a greater or lesser degree throughout his career, the textual account presented above is one of the earliest and most primitive of treatments of Christian philosophy that Gilson provides. If, as I contend, this is part of the gestational period of Gilson's Christian philosophy, then Gilson's treatment of Christian philosophy in *La philosophie de saint Bonaventure* can be truly said to be in its early development not only temporally but also conceptually, given the generality of the ideas presented. Let us now move forward both temporally and philosophically to examine Gilson's next great contribution to Christian philosophy, as found in the third edition of *Le Thomisme* (1929).

## 2.2. *Initial Notions of St. Thomas as a Christian philosopher:*

### *Le Thomisme*

With the third edition of *Le Thomisme*, one finds a gradually maturing understanding of Christian philosophy, so much so that Gilson provides his first formal definition of Christian philosophy in print. In this section, I will present not only that definition, but also Gilson's framing of the discussion at this unique juncture in the scope of his works. As the French edition of this work was finally published in 1927—just prior to Bréhier's "Y a-t-il une philosophie chrétienne?" in 1928—one finds Gilson presenting St. Thomas' philosophical thought as a Christian philosophy, but with a more nuanced understanding of what he means by "Christian philosophy" than he had displayed in his 1924 work on St. Bonaventure. Still, the presentation lacks the urgency that Gilson would eventually display in defending the validity of the phrase, once the Christian philosophy debates

began soon afterwards. With this point in mind, let us proceed to examine Gilson's Christian philosophy as evidenced by key texts in Chapters 1 and 2 of the third edition of *Le Thomisme*.

As an important starting point, Gilson pursues his examination of the philosophical thought of St. Thomas by searching in those works which make up the vast majority of St. Thomas' corpus: viz. his works of Christian theology. Is there, then, a philosophy present within these works that are generally regarded to be the textual heart of Thomism? Within the context of answering this, Gilson wonders openly what philosophy is for St. Thomas, and provides what appears to be his first definition of Christian philosophy in print:

What then is this philosophy? St. Thomas has never practiced or conceived it, except in its proper place within the hierarchic structure of Christian Wisdom, and therefore, no doubt, it never occurred to him to detach it from it and to give it a special name. Yet it might have a name, because it existed and had a name long before St. Thomas transformed it and marked it so deeply with his impress: it is the "Christian Philosophy." We mean by this a philosophy which intends to be a rational interpretation of data, but considers as the essential element of these data the religious Faith, the object of which is defined by the Christian revelation. (Gilson 1929, 28–9)

Firstly, for Gilson, the Thomistic notion of philosophy would never imply something so markedly separate from Christian Wisdom that it would be uninfluenced by it. For St. Thomas, there is a philosophy which is always found in close relationship to Christian thought, and particularly to Christian theology. Here, however, Gilson admits that while St. Thomas never gives this philosophy a special name, an appropriate one already existed before St. Thomas came along to perfect it: "Christian philosophy." How, then, can a "philosophy" be deemed "Christian," given Gilson's growing understanding of the phrase?

The first element of this phrase concerns what it means to be "philosophical": "a rational interpretation of data..." Reason, based upon the proper rules of logic, is used to interpret some data offered for consideration—data which is "open-house" and thus capable of being reasoned about with the Christian and non-Christian alike. This is indeed a philosophical use of the mind. The second characteristic points at least vaguely to how Christianity enters into and influences this philosophy: "but considers as the essential element of these data the religious Faith, the object of which is defined by the Christian revelation." Thus, Christianity suggests certain data as

starting points for philosophical investigation and development—and even for proof—given that such data are not articles of faith.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, it should be noted that such a definition of Christian philosophy does not, in truth, necessitate the particular mode in which Christian philosophy has to be undertaken. While Gilson contends that the Christian philosophy of St. Thomas is historically found *de facto* within his massive theological corpus as a component part of Christian Wisdom—which we called the mode of Christian philosophy *as ancilla theologiae*—at least by definition philosophy may still be Christian if such a philosophy remains a truly rational endeavor somehow influenced in the data that it investigates by Christian revelation and theology. Indeed, one may, at least in theory, produce on the basis of this definition a Christian philosophy as *amicus theologiae* outside of a theological context—though how the *end* employed by the Christian philosopher distinguishes between these two modes will not come into the discussion until much later in Gilson's thought.

Still, at this point in Gilson's career, even if occasioned in a work on the philosophical thought of St. Thomas, he does not regard Christian philosophy as belonging exclusively to St. Thomas. There were, in fact, many instantiations of Christian philosophy throughout the history of the Church with different specific emphases as regards how philosophy relates to Christianity. As Gilson explains:

Within such a doctrine the role assigned to reason and the place assigned to philosophy may vary endlessly: St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure, Pascal will incline to treat secular knowledge with suspicion and to expect from this handmaid a service kept under strict surveillance; Clement of Alexandria, John Damascene, Albert the Great, St. Thomas of Aquino, Roger Bacon will, on the contrary, give it wider scope; but all agreed on the essential point, namely, that there is a Christian philosophy, that is to say, a philosophy directed towards an object which eludes its grasp, but from which, knowing that it exists, it cannot turn away. (Gilson 1929, 29; my emphasis)

Whether such thinkers had more suspicion of secular philosophical learning or a more optimistic understanding of it, they were in agreement that

8. The idea that Christianity influences the development of Christian philosophy by suggesting starting points for rational investigation—which would have otherwise been overlooked without such aid—was championed by Gilson's disciple, Joseph Owens. While Owens' treatment is his own, it is so faithful to the spirit of Gilson that it provides a helpful interpretive key for correctly understanding and reading Gilson on Christian philosophy (see Owens 1990, 25–6).



philosophy could and should be employed for a greater understanding of whatever rational contents are contained within and presented by the Christian faith for such examination.<sup>9</sup> Such a reading here is consistent with our explanation of Gilson's more incipient notion of Christian philosophy as noted in his 1924 treatment of St. Bonaventure.

Furthermore, if Christian philosophy is occasioned in this process of rationally interpreting the philosophical contents of the faith, the question remains as to how such an occasioning occurs without thereby rendering the result theological as such. Gilson takes note of this influence of Christianity upon the origin of Christian philosophy in the following manner:

Hence, Faith gives rise to a whole series of influences and actions, the consequences of which are of the utmost importance within Reason itself, which yet does not cease to be pure Reason. Faith in Revelation does not result in destroying the rationality of our knowledge, but, on the contrary, in allowing it to develop more completely; just as Grace does not destroy our nature, but fertilizes, exalts and perfects it, so Faith, by its influence upon Reason as such, promotes the development of a rational activity of a more fruitful kind. (Gilson 1929, 44)

Thus, the influence of faith upon reason in the development of a Christian philosophy is analogous to the action of grace upon nature, which, rather than destroying nature, helps nature achieve its proper perfection through its restorative action. Likewise, Christian faith positively aids the Christian philosopher to reason in a more fruitful and philosophically correct manner.<sup>10</sup> This points to the fact that for Gilson, Christianity provides subjective

9. Richard Fafara explains the notion of Christian philosophy in *Le Thomisme* precisely as a philosophy which can help bring understanding to the contents of faith—or at least to the areas of overlap of reason and faith, as well as of philosophy and theology. As he explains, based upon Gilson's definition, which we have already cited above: "Because there is a domain common to both philosophy and theology, reason guided by faith can explore the saving truth revealed by God and accessible to the light of human natural reason. Gilson defined this use of reason as 'Christian philosophy'—a 'philosophy which wishes to be a rational interpretation of the given but for which the essential element of the given is Christian Revelation which defines the object.' And since Christian philosophy is philosophy, it is purely rational while in accord with the faith" (Fafara 2013, 268). This does seem to imply very much that Gilson was holding to a notion of Christian philosophy like that of *fides quaerens intellectum*—that is, the *intellectum* element of it at least—something which he will more clearly elucidate in 1931.

10. One is reminded of Pope St. John Paul II, who echoes Gilson's sentiment in *Fides et Ratio*. Also explicating St. Thomas' thought on the relationship of faith and reason, the great Polish philosopher-saint explains: "Just as grace builds on nature and brings it to fulfillment, so faith builds upon and perfects reason" (John Paul II 1998, par. 43).

aids<sup>11</sup> that help the agent develop a true philosophy precisely because their Christianity has imbued and nourished their intellect and will.

Even so, Gilson also maintains that Christianity exerts an influence on the development of Christian philosophy through guiding it with what we can call objective aids (see Maritain 1955, 18). He explains how St. Thomas' thought is aided in an objective manner by means of Christian revelation:

His thought proceeds under the helpful impulse of his Faith, as indeed he recognizes; but he notes that in following the road of Revelation, Reason easily finds and, as it were, recognizes the truths which it might have run some risk of mistaking. The traveler who has been led by a guide to the summit, is none the less entitled to the spectacle which unfolds itself from there, and the view is none the less true, because an external assistance has led him to it. (Gilson 1929, 45)

Thus, faith in Christian revelation may lead the Christian philosopher—by which is here meant St. Thomas, though with no indication that this is true only of him—to properly rational truths “which it might have run some risk of mistaking.” This points to our previous distinction between articles of faith and preambles of faith. Preambles of faith refer to those truths about God and salvation that are inherently rational and capable of being attained by means of unaided reason, but which are so *de facto* difficult and so important for salvation that they have also been revealed. Examples of such data are God's existence, eternity, and goodness, and the immortality of the human soul—but even in the moral realm, one can also mention the Decalogue. Furthermore, one can additionally include the Judeo-Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* as such a truth which—while initially attained by means of faith in revelation—is subsequently amenable to philosophical grounding and development.

Hence, taught at first by Christian revelation, these objective data known as preambles of faith then become starting points for rational investigation according to the proper rules of philosophy, so preventing any formal

11. The distinction between the *subjective* and *objective* influences of Christianity upon the philosopher in the production of Christian philosophy will be developed in greater depth by Jacques Maritain. Gilson will read Maritain's later writings and continue to apply those distinctions within later works, though it does not appear that at this early stage he was originally prompted by Maritain on this point. (See Maritain 1955). See Jacques Maritain, 1933, *De la philosophie chrétienne* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer), 38, translated by Edward H. Flannery as *An Essay on Christian Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), 18. All subsequent citations for this text refer to the pagination in the Flannery English translation.

conflation of Christian theology and Christian philosophy as such. As Gilson explains of St. Thomas' philosophical thought:

The philosophy of St. Thomas presents itself as a system of truths rigorously demonstrable and is justifiable, precisely qua philosophy, by Reason alone. When St. Thomas speaks as philosopher, his demonstrations alone are under discussion, and it matters little whether the thesis he upholds occupies the place assigned to it by Faith, since he never introduces Faith into the argument and does not ask us to introduce it into the proofs of what he considers as rationally demonstrable. (Gilson 1929, 51)

For St. Thomas the Christian philosopher, his philosophical arguments are just that: rational arguments and proofs based upon premises open to the believer and non-believer alike. Regardless of the fact that the Christian faith has suggested certain points for rational investigation, and even for rational demonstration, Thomistic Christian philosophy never inserts the properly revealed into its premises, nor does it seek to prove them. In other words, the articles of faith neither enter into the premises nor do they as such become topics for demonstration. For Gilson, Christian philosophy remains philosophy precisely because the agent engages in properly philosophical acts even if, in the process, Christianity has aided him or her both subjectively and objectively.

With these points in mind, let us now proceed into the heart of the Christian philosophy debates in France in the early 1930s, and examine how Gilson's thought develops at the conclusion of what I am calling his Christian philosophy in gestation.

### 2.3. Étienne Gilson and the First Christian Philosophy Debate<sup>12</sup>

As was mentioned above, the publication of Bréhier's "Y a-t-il une philosophie chrétienne?" in 1928 led to the eruption of what has become called "the Christian philosophy controversy," which in turn led to a series of public debates in France in the 1930s. The first of these debates that is generally regarded as having historical significance occurred at the *Société française de Philosophie* meeting in March 1931. At this debate, there were four main interlocutors: the Rationalists Émile Bréhier and Léon Brunschvicg argued

12. This sub-section is based upon Gilson's 1931 presentation "La notion de philosophie chrétienne" (Session of 21<sup>st</sup> March, *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* 31, no. 2), translated by Gregory Sadler as "The Notion of Christian Philosophy," in *Reason fulfilled by Revelation: The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates in France* (2011). All subsequent citations and page references for this work are taken from the Sadler English edition.

against the possibility of a Christian philosophy, while Gilson and Jacques Maritain defended the use of the phrase.<sup>13</sup> In his presentation, Gilson argues first for the phrase being at least logically possible. Does “Christian philosophy” necessarily imply a contradiction? What does the phrase even mean? Gilson sets up these problems and answers them in the following manner:

If philosophical systems exist, purely rational in their principles and in their methods, whose existence would not be explained without the existence of the Christian religion, the philosophies that they define merit the name of Christian philosophies. This notion does not correspond to a concept of a pure essence, that of the philosopher or that of the Christian, but to the possibility of a complex historical reality: that of a revelation generative of reason. The two orders remain distinct, even if the relation that unites them be intrinsic. (Gilson 2011, 130)

Firstly, it should be noted that Gilson is approaching the problem of Christian philosophy from the historical perspective. Fact or fiction: have there been real philosophies that have been so factually influenced by Christianity that minus that influence those philosophies most likely would not have existed? If the answer is yes, then such philosophies are deserving of the appellation “Christian.” That what he means by this does not imply a logical contradiction or a conflation of Christian theology and philosophy is attested to by the fact that he notes that the orders of philosophy and theology and of reason and faith remain distinct: that is, that both Christian philosophy and Christian theology can and do remain formally distinct endeavors, given that the rules of philosophy and the rules of theology are followed when either is employed.

Furthermore, in the above text, Gilson provides one of his most famous phrases for describing the influence of Christianity upon the development of a Christian philosophy: “that of a revelation generative of reason” (Gilson 2011, 130). What is meant by this choice of words maps on to much of what Gilson had said in works prior to the outbreak of the Christian philosophy controversy. Christian revelation can and does—that is, historically speaking, has in fact in the case of many Christian thinkers—offered certain data as revealed that proved amenable to philosophical investigation

13. As he was very old and blind, Maurice Blondel sent a letter which was read at the conference on his behalf. While an advocate of Christian philosophy, and later “Catholic philosophy,” he was very much at odds with the positions of both Gilson and Maritain: something that would lead to a further side controversy outside of the scope of this paper.

and development. Such data, which we called preambles of faith, acted as starting points for further philosophical investigation, grounding, and even proof.<sup>14</sup>

Gilson proceeds to present St. Augustine's notion of Christian philosophy—an understanding he himself embraces at this early stage of his career. He does so through an examination of key textual principles concerning Augustine's views on the overall relationship between faith and reason. As Gilson explains, in reference to St. Augustine:

What distinguishes the Christian philosopher from the pagan philosopher is therefore that he is placed by faith in possession of a truth that is believed, which reason has only to transform into a truth that is known. This is the meaning of the famous *credo ut intelligam*. The two orders remain distinct, for knowing is not believing, but while retaining its essence completely, in the conditions of its exercise reason enters into intimate relation with faith, for thanks to faith it can rediscover what it would never have succeeded in discovering. (Gilson 2011, 134)

Thus, the Christian philosopher—engaging in the Augustinian/Anselmian “believing that he may understand”—receives certain truths by means of faith in revelation that are amenable to subsequent rational development or demonstration. The Christian thinker becomes a Christian philosopher through this process of rational transformation. He has a faith that is truly seeking to understand what he is capable of rationally understanding. While maintaining the formal/logical distinction between philosophy and theology as such, Gilson reveals here in this text that for him, the unity which takes place between Christianity and philosophy is one that occurs in the order of exercise, a distinction which Jacques Maritain will make in his own presentation at this Christian philosophy debate, and which the latter will develop throughout his career.<sup>15</sup> While philosophy and theology are

14. Still, our point that Christian philosophy can be found as *ancilla theologiae*, in the sense of the philosophical component used by a theologian, or as an *amicus theologiae* used by a philosopher in an “open-house” setting, remains implicit in all that Gilson has been saying thus far.

15. Maritain notes the distinction between the *order of specification* (the formal order) and the *order of exercise*. In the order of specification, theology and philosophy are formally distinct sciences. A consideration of philosophy in this order is a consideration of philosophy in its *nature*. However, in the *order of exercise*, within the agent doing philosophy, there is a unity within the human person in which Christianity very much influences how one develops one's philosophy. In this regard, philosophy may be Christian by virtue of its state. (See Maritain 1955, 11–2).

distinct in the formal order, when it comes to constructing a truer, better philosophy, for Christians themselves, their “conditions of exercise” will be better positioned for having had this encounter with Christian revelation through faith.

At what I am calling the closing of this gestational stage of Christian philosophy, Gilson provides a definition of Christian philosophy very much in line with this Augustinian understanding of the relationship between faith and reason:

What is peculiar to the Christian is being convinced of the rational fertility of his faith and being sure that this fertility is inexhaustible. If we pay attention, that is the true meaning of St. Augustine’s *credo ut intelligam* and St. Anselm’s *fides quaerens intellectum*: a Christian’s effort to draw some of reason’s knowledge from faith in revelation. That is why these two formulas are the true definition of Christian philosophy. (Gilson 2011, 138–39; my emphasis)<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the first stage of Gilson’s Christian philosophy draws to its completion as a philosophy which has been nourished and made more fertile, in fact, through an encounter with Christian revelation in faith. The Christian philosophical act is the act of a Christian doing philosophy with and through a reason whose conditions of exercise have been made all the better in this process of seeking to know that content—those preambles of faith—which are all the more capable of rational explication and demonstration. Faith nurtures reason and philosophical thinking to new heights, at least *de facto*—though not necessarily *de iure*—ones so difficult that these starting points and pathways would have been otherwise overlooked without this influence.

Furthermore, Gilson also notes specific, common characteristics that, if Christian philosophies have ever existed, these philosophies would display in their own ways:

1. These will be philosophies that consider the Judeo-Christian revelation as a morally necessary aid to reason. Thanks to that guide, they can eliminate

16. It is also very much worth noting that while Gilson misses this point here, he does in later works correctly state that Augustine’s original phrase was in the second person, “Crede ut intelligas,” to which St. Anselm, centuries later, responded in the first person, “Credo ut intelligam.”

errors, add new truths to the old ones, complete the old truths, or simply preserve them.

2. Insofar as Christian, they will limit themselves to philosophical problems about which revelation can serve them as a guide: God, man with his relations with God, nature in its relations with God. (Gilson 2011, 138–9)

Firstly, Gilson writes that Christian philosophies regard “Judeo-Christian revelation as a morally necessary aid to reason,” by which I contend he is referring to a *de facto* necessity. Such a necessity is one that does not in principle require revelation’s help. As moral certitude is a certitude which any reasonable person can maintain based upon a reasonable level of evidence, so the moral necessity that Gilson speaks of here refers to the reasonable necessity for revelation’s help to attain such difficult rational truths as contained in the preambles of faith. This makes sense, especially given the context of the remainder of the text quoted just above. By revelation, he says, these Christian philosophies “can eliminate errors, add new truths to the old ones, complete the old truths, or simply preserve them.” Thus, Christian revelation has a regulative role in relation to the development of Christian philosophy, preventing the Christian philosopher from falling into many of the errors of his non-Christian counterparts, but also a positive role, suggesting “new”—that is, previously unattained—truths, strengthening our certitude about those previously held with less confidence, and offering further lines of defense, even for more established philosophical positions.

This points toward the second major characteristic of Christian philosophy for Gilson at the end of this first stage of Christian philosophy. The fact that Christianity will provide both a regulative and positive influence upon Christian philosophy will, in turn, have consequences for the topics that are undertaken. As Gilson says in the above text, “they will limit themselves to philosophical problems about which revelation can serve them as a guide: God, man with his relations with God, nature in its relations with God.” In this way, Christian revelation suggests not only data—as we said, rational data which has also been revealed—for philosophical consideration, but also, in so doing, the very topics and areas of philosophical development for which Christian revelation is most able to offer assistance. For this reason, Christian philosophy often—though not exclusively—focuses on questions in the following areas: (1) natural theology—God’s existence and his attributes; (2) metaphysics—creation, the immateriality and immortality of the soul; (3) anthropology and epistemology—the human person and human

knowing; (4) the moral life. Christian philosophy is truly a philosophy of the *exitus* from God, and the *reditus* back to him.

At this final moment of its first stage, Gilsonian Christian philosophy is indeed a philosophical reflection upon the rational content suggested by the Christian faith—both a “Credo ut intelligam” and a “Fides quaerens intellectum.” However, like anything that naturally develops and matures over time, it is both consistent and never static as it builds upon already established principles. Let us therefore now proceed to his second stage as it pertains to Christian philosophy, with a view to examining the latter’s further development and maturation.

### 3. FROM HISTORICAL FACT TO LIVING ACT: GILSON’S CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY FROM THE 1930S TO THE 1940S

In the following section,<sup>17</sup> I will address how Gilson’s doctrine concerning Christian philosophy develops within what I am calling his second stage: from his initial defense of the historical facticity of the doctrine to his later emphasis upon it as primarily an act or way of philosophizing.

#### 3.1. *Christian Philosophy as Historical Reality: From L’esprit de la Philosophie medievale*

It should be noted that Gilson ends his defense of the possibility of Christian philosophy in “The Notion of Christian Philosophy” by asserting that the history of philosophy will have to provide an account of whether Christian philosophies really did exist (see Gilson 2011, 140). Gilson’s Gifford Lectures of 1931–32—published as *L’esprit de la Philosophie médiévale (The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy)*<sup>18</sup>—will be his attempt to take up that task himself. He begins this work by framing the problem. For Gilson, at the beginning of his second stage, the solution to the problem of Christian philosophy, even if undertaken historically, will be found in the order of exercise:

17. See chapters 7 and 8 of my unpublished dissertation, “Étienne Gilson and the First Two Stages of His Christian Philosophy” (Capehart 2018, 331–543). Similarly, in that work I construe Gilson’s second stage as a growing awareness and treatment of Christian philosophy, from not only its factual existence in the works of St. Thomas and many other Medieval thinkers, but primarily as *an act and way of philosophizing* ordered toward a *Christian end*. As we will see, the emphasis on Christianity’s influence in the order of final causality in the development of Christian philosophy will grow significantly in Gilson’s writings of this second stage.

18. I refer here to the second edition (Paris: Vrin), translated by A.H.C. Downes as *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy: Gifford Lectures 1931–1932* (1936). All subsequent English citations and page references for this work are taken from the Downes English edition. Furthermore, this second French edition has the same content as the first French one, but was revised into a single volume.



If the case stands thus, then, although we do not yet know what goes to make up a Christian philosophy, there seems to be nothing theoretically contradictory about the idea; there is at least a standing-ground on which it would not be impossible, that, namely, of the conditions of fact under which the reason of Christians is to be exercised. There is no such thing as a Christian reason, but there may very well be a Christian exercise of reason. (Gilson 1936, 12)

This text points to the fact that Gilson does not regard Christian philosophy as something that exists in the formal order. If it exists at all, it is because a Christian's "exercise of reason" has been so positively altered—as he says, by "conditions of fact"—to produce a unique philosophy. Thus, a Christian "exercise of reason" may very well produce a philosophy deserving of the name "Christian" if Christianity has so thoroughly altered those conditions as to help bring this philosophy about.

Gilson then explains what the content of this unique, Christian philosophy must be. It can be summarized by St. Augustine's "*nisi credideritis non intelligetis*" and St. Anselm's "*fides quaerens intellectum*" (see Gilson 1936, 33). He explicates this content in light of those phrases in the following manner: "this effort of truth believed to transform itself into truth known, is truly the life of Christian wisdom, and the body of rational truths resulting from the effort is Christian philosophy itself. Thus the content of Christian philosophy is that body of rational truths discovered, explored or simply safeguarded, thanks to the help reason receives from revelation" (Gilson 1936, 34–5; my emphasis). Hence, what he calls the "content of Christian philosophy" consists in those truths which, while previously known by faith, have undergone a rational, philosophical development or grounding. Christianity thus enters in and suggests certain truths for investigation or even provides a greater confidence in truths already philosophically maintained. While not mentioned here in this text, the fact that he is referring to truths which have been revealed but which are capable of rational development means that Gilson must be speaking of preambles of faith. Thus, the content of Christian philosophy, though originally inspired by an encounter with Christian revelation, is truly an "open-house" endeavor founded upon truths open to believer and non-believer alike.

Furthermore, Gilson builds upon this explanation when he describes the task and methodology of the Christian philosopher:

What [the Christian philosopher] asks himself is simply this: whether, among those propositions which by faith he believes to be true, there are not a certain number which reason may know to be true. In so far as the believer bases his

affirmations on the intimate conviction gained from faith he remains purely and simply a believer, he has not yet entered the gates of philosophy; but when amongst his beliefs he finds some that are capable of becoming objects of science then he becomes a philosopher, and if it is to the Christian faith that he owes this new philosophical insight, he becomes a Christian philosopher. (Gilson 1936, 36)

Thus, one begins as a Christian, that is, as a simple Christian believer. This Christian has at least minimally attained an encounter with Christ and his teachings through faith, even if one is speaking only of a basic catechetical knowledge of the Faith. Some of those teachings—the preambles—may come to be known by reason. Were one to remain on that level of knowing those truths by faith alone, one would remain just a Christian believer. It is by attempting to come to rational knowledge of those same truths that one becomes a philosopher. Because one would not have thought to look to these truths in order to rationally develop or even to demonstrate them without revelation's suggestion, it is appropriate to call one a Christian philosopher who has engaged in such a process of philosophizing. A Christian philosophy is indeed a philosophy permeated by the preambles of faith.

Gilson then proceeds to provide his landmark definition of Christian philosophy as found in Chapter 2 of *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*:

Thus I call Christian, every philosophy which, although keeping the two orders formally distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation as an indispensable auxiliary to reason. For whoever understands it thus, the concept does not correspond to any simple essence susceptible of abstract definition; but corresponds much rather to a concrete historical reality as something calling for description. It is but one of the species of the genus philosophy and includes in its extension all those philosophical systems which were in fact what they were only because a Christian religion existed and because they were ready to submit to its influence. (Gilson 1936, 37)

This definition harkens back to the distinction we already noted in Maritain's thought concerning Christian philosophy between the formal/logical order—that is, the order of specification—and the order of exercise—that is, the concrete state of a philosophy. Gilson, in this definition, is maintaining that what he means by “Christian philosophy” respects the formal distinction between philosophy and Christian revelation, though this revelation acts as an aid to the reason of the philosopher in the act of developing this philosophy. Christian philosophy is a concrete historical reality, precisely

because many Christian thinkers, respecting the proper, logical rules of philosophy and of Christian theology, embraced the influence of Christian revelation in suggesting starting points, topics, and problems for rational development that would have otherwise at least *de facto* been so difficult that they would have been overlooked. Indeed, in this definition of Christian philosophy, Gilson is emphasizing how Christianity acts as a *quasi*-efficient cause for the production of Christian philosophy.

It is precisely in suggesting starting points or problems to be solved rationally that Christianity acts in such a manner. Concerning this point of how the Christian philosopher discerns problems to investigate through the inspiration of Christian revelation, Gilson notes the following:

Since the Christian revelation teaches us only truths which are necessary to salvation, its influence could extend only to those parts of philosophy that concern the existence and nature of God, and the origin, nature, and destiny of the soul (Gilson 1936, 38).

Thus, in light of the fact that the kind of rational data which are also revealed—that is, the preambles of faith—are limited in scope to being those rational truths also necessary for salvation, Gilson then suggests that Christian philosophies will tend to focus especially upon problems in these areas pertaining to God—his existence and nature as knowable through effects—and man in his fullness (particularly regarding the soul). As he says slightly later on in an additional text,

In a word, faith has a simplifying influence on all Christian philosophers worthy of the name, and their originality shines forth especially in the sphere directly influenced by faith, that is to say in the doctrine concerning God and man, and man's relations with God (Gilson 1936, 38).

Thus, Christian philosophy at its core pertains most especially to the notions of God and man—who is both body and soul—and man's relations with God.

With this explained, let us now turn to Gilson's next great work of his second stage, which shows how he begins to emphasize the theologian's use of Christian philosophy ordered toward explicitly Christian ends.

### 3.2. *Christian Philosophy in the Service of Theology:*

#### *From Christianisme et Philosophie*

To begin our treatment of this next work, we turn to how Gilson defends the theologian's right to use philosophy. This right is based upon the theologian's end:

All our theologians teach that theology has the right to use philosophy, in view of the ends proper to it; they all do it, to such an extent that the clearest expositions of their most original philosophical theses are often found in their theological works. What explanation can be given for so constant a phenomenon except that a theologian is practically obliged to intervene directly in philosophical disputes, and to settle them as a philosopher, if he wants to get for himself the materials necessary for his work as a theologian? (Gilson 1939, 89)<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the theologian may use philosophy for the ends of his theology. More precisely, he or she enters into philosophical disputes because the theologian needs a well-tuned, right-thinking philosophy to aid them in their theology. However, he or she makes a foray into these philosophical problems and solves them as a philosopher. How could the philosophical problems of God's existence, the immortality of the soul, and man's knowledge of the moral life—just to offer a few examples—not have import for the theologian? For the philosophizing Christian theologian—that is, the Christian philosopher engaged in Christian philosophy as *ancilla theologiae*—how well one pursues a philosophy of the preambles of the faith will truly affect how well one does one's theology, because one employs that very philosophy within it.

It is here, in *Christianisme et Philosophie*, that Gilson arrives at a point that is important for his understanding of Christian philosophy for the remainder of his career: viz. that Christian philosophy *par excellence* is ordered toward the service of theology. As he explains in the following manner, with regard to a philosophy of the preambles:

Unless, therefore, the existence of God, His Unity, Creative Power, and all the attributes knowable by natural reason, but revealed by God Himself, which are prescribed to all as things that must be believed, are excluded from those things *quae ad religionem pertinent*, it seems hardly possible to avoid the

19. *Christianisme et Philosophie* was first published in 1936 (Paris: Vrin), and translated by Ralph MacDonald as *Christianity and Philosophy* in 1939. All subsequent English citations and page references for this work are taken from the MacDonald translation.

conclusion that the natural theology of the Christian is at the service of his supernatural theology. But it is precisely in this state of service that it finds itself as philosophy. (Gilson 1939, 96–7)

Thus, as natural theology pertains essentially to the rational treatment and demonstration of the preambles, but the preambles themselves are also part of revealed theology, Gilson acknowledges that natural theology—the pinnacle of Christian philosophy—in its really existing state functions at the service of revealed theology.

However, this does not rule out the possibility or even need for a rigorous Christian philosophy as *amicus theologiae* outside of theology. With this in mind, Gilson re-affirms the formal distinction between philosophy and theology as such—as found in the thought of St. Albert and St. Thomas—as the basis for this proper relationship of service to theology:

If Albert the Great and St. Thomas may be called the authors of that rebirth, it is because they worked energetically to distinguish the philosophical from the theological, and to restore to honour a speculation worthy of the name of philosophy. It is, however, above all for the sake of theology that they rendered this great service to philosophy. In order that philosophy might serve, it was necessary first of all that it exist as philosophy, and so they began by freeing it patiently from its theological gangue, giving it its charter, which recognized rights but also prescribed duties. (Gilson 1939, 97)

Thus, Gilson sees that Albert and Thomas recognized that a formally theologized philosophy which did not proceed from philosophical principles according to the light of reason was no help to a Sacred Theology which sought to be a properly organized *scientia*. Only a formally distinct and robust philosophy, which first exists as philosophy—as he says above—could so aid theology. For Gilson this is what Christian philosophy has done and still does. If it must exist as philosophy “first,” before it can exist at theology’s service, it then seems that a Christian philosophy as *ancilla theologiae* necessarily requires a robust Christian philosophy as *amicus theologiae* as ontologically, though not necessarily temporally, prior to the former. Thus, the more Gilson emphasizes the importance of Christian philosophy as *ancilla*, the more the need to develop a sound Christian philosophy as *amicus* outside of theology in order to aid the former mode of Christian philosophy appears necessarily entailed.

Still, for Gilson, Christian philosophy in either mode is best developed by first turning to the greatest examples of Christian philosophy, viz. the

Christian theologians of the Middle Ages, with St. Thomas as the greatest among them. Therefore, Christian philosophy as *amicus* is better produced by having studied *Sacra Doctrina* in light of its philosophical component, Christian philosophy as *ancilla*. This points further to the notion of the reciprocal fecundity of Christianity and Christian philosophy—namely, that Christian faith ennobles and enriches a rigorous Christian philosophy, which is thus better equipped to achieve rational truth and, likewise, better able to be employed in the service of theology.

A final point of note is that for the first time in his career here, in *Christianisme et Philosophie*, Gilson mentions *Aeterni Patris* in defense of his understanding of Christian philosophy. Explaining Leo XIII's treatment of philosophy in that encyclical, he notes the following:

It is here indeed a question of philosophy: *philosophia*; of a philosophy which is truly the work of natural reason: *naturalis ratio*; of a natural philosophy, however, which facilitates the access to faith; *iter ad fidem aperire*; which can do so today better than ever because the grace of Christ has restored and augmented the powers of natural reason: *instauravit et auxit*. Such is the exercise of reason that the title of the Encyclical designates by the name of Christian philosophy. (Gilson 1939, 92)<sup>20</sup>

Such an understanding of Christian philosophy repeats much of what Gilson has already said before concerning Christian philosophy. First, it is formally a work of reason, and hence, still very much philosophy. Interestingly, the text notes that sense of reciprocal fecundity—that Christianity ennobles the philosophical, but so ennobled, this philosophy better aids the understanding of the faith. As he says, it “facilitates the access to the faith,” precisely because Christ's healing grace “has restored and augmented the powers of natural reason.”

Moreover, this aid of Christianity is not only on a subjective level, but also, as we have noted concerning the revelation of preambles, on an objective one. Here, Gilson quotes *Aeterni Patris*, par. 9, for the first of what will be numerous times throughout the remainder of his career, in defense of

20. Note that the actual text of *Aeterni Patris* does not use the phrase Christian philosophy within it, but soon after its initial publication Leo XIII himself called the encyclical “Our encyclical letter on the restoring in Christian schools of Christian philosophy according to the mind of the angelic doctor St. Thomas Aquinas” (Gilson 1954, 6). Hence, the alternate title to the encyclical soon after its publication became “On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy in Schools,” or simply “On Christian Philosophy.” It is to this fact that Gilson is referring when he speaks of what it “designates by the name of *Christian philosophy*.”

his understanding of the subjective and objective influence of Christianity upon the development of Christian philosophy:

Let one read again the following words: “Those who join submission to the Christian faith to the study of philosophy, are those who philosophize in the best possible manner, since the splendor of the divine truths, accepted by the soul, assists the intelligence itself, from which it not only does not detract anything, but actually adds considerably to its nobility, penetration and stability.” (Gilson 1939, 93 quoting from *Aeterni Patris*, par. 9)

Indeed, while grace has restored the reason of the Christian philosopher, revelation has aided the philosopher in that through the act of faith in “divine truths,” the intelligence has been enhanced with “nobility, penetration and stability.” Though the phrase is not present within the text of Leo XIII’s encyclical, Gilson sees in the work the same understanding of the relationship of Christianity to philosophy that is at the heart of his own notion of Christian philosophy. As we will see, Gilson will continue to be influenced further in his developing notion of Christian philosophy by his encounter with *Aeterni Patris*. To see this, we will move on to works where Gilson continues to highlight Christian philosophy as present in the work of those philosophizing theologians who ordered that philosophical activity toward a theological end.

### 3.3. *Christian philosophy and the Philosophizing Theologian: From Le Thomisme (5th Edition) and “Historical Research and the Future of Scholasticism”*

For Gilson, as evidenced within the fifth edition of *Le Thomisme*,<sup>21</sup> a key point in understanding the philosophy of St. Thomas is that, ultimately, the Angelic Doctor maintains a theological end even where his philosophy is concerned. When St. Thomas did philosophy, he did so primarily as a philosophizing theologian. Thus, were one to abstract his philosophy out of its theological context and reconstruct it according to a philosophical order, one would not only be doing precisely what Thomas did not do, but also one would risk completely misconstruing that philosophy. As Gilson explains,

21. *Le Thomisme: Introduction à la Philosophie de Saint Thomas d’Aquin*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, revised and augmented (Paris: J. Vrin), translated by L.K. Shook as *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (1956). All subsequent English citations and page references for this work are taken from this Shook edition.

It is tempting to extract from the theological works of St. Thomas, the philosophical notions which they contain, and then to reconstruct them into some kind of philosophical order, but this is to imply that St. Thomas perhaps wished to construct a philosophy with purely philosophical ends, not with the ends proper to the Christian Doctor. Above all, it runs the infinitely graver risk of mistaking the true philosophical meaning of his philosophy. (Gilson 1956, 8)

Indeed, St. Thomas constructed his philosophy qua Christian Doctor. His theological ends governed how he used and developed his philosophy. To pull this philosophy out of this context in Gilson's view would potentially cause one to misconstrue greatly St. Thomas' entire philosophical and theological project.

Thus, in the following text, Gilson provides a key explanation for his understanding of theology and philosophy from the latter half of his second stage concerning Christian philosophy, and going into his third stage:

It has become customary to label "theological" any conclusion whose premises presuppose faith in a divinely revealed truth, and to label "philosophical" any conclusion whose premises are purely rational, that is, known by the light of natural reason alone. This is not the point of view stated by St. Thomas himself at the beginning of his Prologue to the Second Book of his commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard. According to him, the philosopher considers the nature of things as they are in themselves, whereas the theologian considers them in their relation to God conceived as being both their origin and their end. From this point of view, every conclusion concerning God himself, or the relations of being to God, is theological in its own right. Some of these conclusions presuppose an act of faith in the divine revelation, but some of them do not. All of them are theological; those, among them, which are purely rational, belong to theology no less than the others. The only difference is that, since these do not presuppose faith, they can be extracted from their theological context and judged, from the point of view of natural reason, as purely philosophical conclusions. (Gilson 1956, 9)<sup>22</sup>

It seems here that Gilson has thrown the traditional scholastic explanation of the division of theology and philosophy—which he has used up until this point in his career—on its head. Prior to this work, even he had regarded the theological properly speaking as reasoning and conclusions drawn from

22. Note that this entire text is not in the original French of the 5<sup>th</sup> edition, but is an addition made by Gilson for the English translation.



premises based upon revealed data accepted by faith, where those premises contain articles of faith or preambles of faith. Furthermore, in his previous works the philosophical pertained to what could be known by the light of reason, based upon “open-house” principles in nature. Additionally, in this earlier view, a material overlap between philosophy and theology could be maintained, where a place is given for philosophy to demonstrate the preambles of faith, such as the existence of God or the immateriality of the soul.

Nevertheless, here, as Gilson presents his new reading of St. Thomas and endorses this form of division involving theology and philosophy, there is a whole new understanding at work. In this newer framing of theology by Gilson, the theologian can treat of any and all things in their relation to God as origin and end—whether dealing with revealed or “open-house” data—whereas in philosophy, the philosopher proper treats of things according to their own natures and for their own sake. Likewise, no longer does the requirement of a previous act of faith in a revealed datum also help to make this division, for even in theology so considered, one may well proceed from properly revealed principles—i.e. the articles of faith—but one may also proceed from objects in nature as long as it is somehow ordered in relation to God: as in the case of, say, a proof for the existence of God, such as any of the Five Ways. Still, even within a given theology so defined, those conclusions which do not presuppose faith can be extracted from that original theological setting and treated as philosophical conclusions.

One can see here that there is a way in which the end of the theologian and the end of the philosopher can be the bases of distinction and also of unity, given the particular situation. As he explains,

Everything in the *Summa* is theological, yet, elements of genuinely philosophical nature are part and parcel of Thomistic theology precisely because, according to St. Thomas himself, the distinction between theology and philosophy does not adequately answer the distinction between faith and reason. As will be seen later on, his theology requires the collaboration of purely philosophical elements used in view of an essentially theological end. (Gilson 1956, 9)<sup>23</sup>

What then gives unity to a theological science that includes objects and elements which, given another context, are most often regarded as philosophical, at least materially speaking, is the end to which theology is directed. For Gilson, the end is truly the key for maintaining the proper

23. It should be noted that this is another clarificatory text added by Gilson for the publication of the English translation.

unity of a theology of the revealed and of a rational, philosophical content within it. Thus, for the entirety of the *Summa theologiae* to be theological, as Gilson claims it to be, means that St. Thomas employs this philosophical content in the service of his theology for an essentially theological end in the order of exercise.

Furthermore, these distinctions still map onto our previous explanations of the two modes of Gilson's notion of Christian philosophy. In the first mode—Christian philosophy as *ancilla theologiae*—philosophy is imported into the theology of St. Thomas or any other Christian theologian and employed for theological ends, such as understanding the rational contents of the faith or, ultimately, for leading souls to salvation in a more efficacious manner. It remains materially and formally speaking philosophical insofar as the theologian must obey the proper rules of philosophy while engaging in reasoning about these natural objects of knowledge even within his theological context. What makes it theology in Gilson's view is that unity of end, that is, of final causality. On the other hand, Gilson hints at the legitimacy of Christian philosophy as *amicus theologiae*, employed by the philosopher for ends proper to that of the philosopher: viz. for leading one's interlocutors to truth by means open to believer and non-believer alike. Such ends, while not necessarily theological, could be called sub-theological, because they are in accord and harmony with the theologian's ends. That a Christian agent engages in philosophical activity for such a goal is the reason we have suggested that the name "amicus theologiae" is most appropriate for it, though Gilson himself did not offer a specific name for this mode.

These ideas point us toward Gilson's highly controversial<sup>24</sup> and yet important essay titled "Historical Research and the Future of Scholasticism."<sup>25</sup> In this work, he calls for his famous "return to theology." In an essay in which he seeks a recovery of Scholastic philosophy, he maintains that,

24. We have already previously noted Steenberghen's rejection of Gilson's theological turn. Laurence K. Shook notes that Gerald Phelan—a longtime friend and collaborator of Gilson's—was furious with Gilson for the contents of this essay and wrote the following to him in reply to it: "I do not like what you have written in *The Modern Schoolman*. This is the first time in my life that I have not been able to say to my students: 'Read what Gilson has written in his most recent article!'" (Shook 1984, 299).

25. See (Gilson, 1951), "Historical Research and the Future of Scholasticism," *The Modern Schoolman*, vol. 29, no. 1: 1–10, reprinted in *A Gilson Reader*, ed. Anton Pegis (1957a). This essay was an English adaptation made by Gilson himself of his paper "Les recherches historico-critiques et l'avenir de la Scolastique," given at the International Scholastic Congress in Rome on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1950. All subsequent page references for this work are taken from the Pegis edition.

historically, this philosophy was encountered in the service of theology as a way of attaining further understanding of the contents of faith. As Gilson contends, “For if theology is the understanding of faith, we cannot isolate this understanding from the faith whose understanding it gives; nor can we isolate faith from the understanding which it is seeking. In brief, it is to its status as an instrument of theology itself that medieval philosophy owes its fecundity” (Gilson 1957a, 162). This text further maps onto what Gilson said in the fifth edition of *Le Thomisme*. As employed by a theologian for a theologian’s end of seeking the salvation of souls, this philosophy is brought into a special unity within theology. Likewise, it is made all the more fruitful in this theological context. Though he does not use the phrase in the essay, Gilson is undoubtedly referring to Christian philosophy as *ancilla theologiae*, but with an eye toward Christian philosophy as *amicus theologiae*.

Gilson then proposes that in order to make Scholastic philosophy anew one should do what the original Scholastics did when they philosophized. They did not begin with an already established philosophy and bring theology into accord with it. On the contrary, they began with faith, transforming the philosophical content according to the demands of that faith. As he explains,

The theologians of the thirteenth century did not begin with the philosophical sciences of their age in order to adapt theology to them; they rather began with faith in order to assume these philosophical sciences within faith by transforming them in its light (Gilson 1957a, 163).

In order to recover and renew Scholasticism, scholastic philosophy—and by that I maintain that one can correctly employ the phrase “Christian philosophy” interchangeably with it, because what he is describing here is exactly what he has been describing as Christian philosophy up to this point in his career—must be returned to its proper place of birth and development: viz. within scholastic theology. According to Gilson’s own words: “To restore it to itself, let us listen to the counsel of history: Scholastic philosophy must return to theology!” (Gilson 1957a, 165). Thus, as we have maintained, Gilson is calling for a return to theology in order for philosophy—that is, for Scholastic, Christian philosophy—to rediscover itself in its fullness. It was born in theology and can be reborn in it as well. Once reborn, this philosophy would be more robust and thus more competent to be employed for ends proper to the philosopher as such.

In truth, he sees *Aeterni Patris* as calling for a new Scholasticism in which theologians philosophize in the same way as the scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages, who philosophized under the light and influence of Christianity and for their theological end:

The philosophy we call Scholastic is not distinguished from other philosophies by its essence; it is rather distinguished from them as the best way of philosophizing. That is indeed how the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* has described Scholastic philosophy, and with perfect reason: *Qui philosophiae studium cum obsequio fidei Christianae conjungunt, ii optime philosophantur* (Leo XIII 1954, par. 9). To philosophize otherwise is assuredly to philosophize, but it is to philosophize less well. At any rate, it is no longer to philosophize as did the Scholastics. (Gilson 1957a, 166)

In this text from *Aeterni Patris*, par. 9, Gilson interprets the call for scholastic philosophy—and by this he means precisely the Christian philosophy that he has consistently argued for from the first stage through his second stage, as developing under the inspiration of Christian faith and theology—to be a way of philosophizing—in fact, the “best way of philosophizing”: one which has been joined to obedience to Christian faith. It is, Gilson believes, by philosophizing as theologians that scholastic Christian philosophy will be renewed and gain a fecundity not seen since the Middle Ages. In this way, Christian philosophy *par excellence*, at the end of Gilson’s second stage, is not only found to be present, historically speaking, in the theology of the great Medieval theologians, but is also a way of philosophizing that Christian thinkers should continue to imitate in their own work. For Gilson, a Christian may indeed philosophize outside of a theological context, apart from a theological end, but he or she philosophizes best who philosophizes like the Scholastics. Or, as Gilson says at the conclusion of his essay,

Only a prophet would be able to say what is to be the shape of its future. But the historian can safely state by whom Scholastic philosophy will be given a true life in the future. The true Scholastic philosophers will always be theologians (Gilson 1957a, 166).

#### 4. GILSON'S CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY IN ITS MATURITY, AND ST. JOHN PAUL II'S *FIDES ET RATIO*

In this final section, I will briefly treat of Gilson's understanding of Christian philosophy and how it points toward the understanding of Christian philosophy presented by St. John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio*.<sup>26</sup>

##### 4.1. *Christian Philosophy as Modus Philosophandi: From "What is Christian Philosophy?"*, *Le Philosophe et la Theologie*, and *Fides et Ratio*

At the beginning of what we are calling Gilson's third stage concerning Christian philosophy, the act of Christian philosophy is not just an historical fact, but rather a way of philosophizing. In this brief exposition of the third stage, I will present Gilson's definitions of Christian philosophy in two major works of this time period—1957 to 1962—as evidence of this, but also as evidence that his Christian philosophy still makes room for both of the modes which we have discussed. Once we have completed this task, we will proceed to tie Gilson's mature understanding of Christian philosophy in with the understanding of the latter presented in St. John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*.<sup>27</sup>

We begin this presentation of Gilson's third stage concerning Christian philosophy with a brief treatment of his essay "What is Christian Philosophy" of 1957, because it is here that Gilson first officially defines Christian philosophy as a way of philosophizing. While in the formerly cited essay "Historical Research and the Future of Scholasticism," Gilson referred to "scholastic philosophy" and—we maintain—was implicitly referring to Christian, scholastic philosophy, here, in "What Is Christian Philosophy," this best way of philosophizing as called for by Pope Leo XIII in *Aeterni Patris* is explicitly called Christian philosophy. Likewise, he re-defines it based upon the *Aeterni Patris*, par. 9 text also cited in the former essay. As he explains,

Clearly, what Leo calls Christian philosophy cannot be reduced to the content of any single philosophy; it is neither a system nor even a doctrine. Rather,

26. See Chapter 9 of my own unpublished dissertation, "Étienne Gilson and the First Two Stages of His Christian Philosophy" (Capehart 2018, 567–71).

27. Readers should note that this is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of Gilson's third stage. Many more works would have to be covered, and in a much more extensive manner. Be that as it may, I am limiting myself to this brief textual account of how he defines Christian philosophy in these two key works of this last period of his life, because of how they tie in with the overall scope of the current essay and help bring it to completion.

it is a way of philosophizing; namely, the attitude of those who “to the study of philosophy unite obedience to the Christian faith” (Leo XIII 1954, par. 9). This philosophical method, or attitude—*philosophandi institutum*—is Christian philosophy itself. (Gilson 1957b, 187)

In this way, the notions of Christianity influencing or occasioning the development of Christian philosophy as an efficient cause and as a final cause are brought together. Obedient to Christian faith, Christian philosophy develops under regulative guidance, but also has those very starting points and topics for development suggested by the preambles of faith. However, as an act and way of philosophizing, Christian philosophy is obedient to the ends that Christianity puts forth. Christian philosophy, in Gilson’s third stage, is primarily a *modus philosophandi* ordered toward Christian ends, as well as developing under the efficient influence of Christian faith. In fact, when pursued thus, it is the best way of philosophizing.

Nevertheless, does this mean that Gilson’s third stage of Christian philosophy can only be done in the mode of Christian philosophy as *ancilla theologiae* employed by the theologian for explicitly theological ends? I think that this is not the case. To show this I will bring in Gilson’s definition from his philosophical memoir *Le Philosophe et la Theologie* (1960; translation 1962). In this book-length work, Gilson explains the “Christian philosophy” of *Aeterni Patris*, which he embraces as his own understanding of Christian philosophy at its fullest level of maturity:

By this formula [of Christian philosophy] the Pope intended to recommend the use of philosophy made by Saint Thomas in the service of theology in all its problems. It matters little whether the truths at stake be accessible to natural reason or escape it; taken in its most comprehensive meaning, Christian philosophy transcends the distinction of scholastic philosophy and scholastic theology. It designates the use the Christian makes of the philosophical reason when, in either one of these two disciplines, he associates religious faith and philosophical reflection. (Gilson 1962, 198)

Here, Gilson repeats what he had said at the end of the second stage: viz., that Christian philosophy properly speaking is at the service of theology. This understanding was influenced by his original historical treatment of the problem of Christian philosophy. Historically speaking, Christian philosophy has been found most often within Scholastic theologies at the service of those theologies. However, Gilson notes that Leo XIII, in *Aeterni Patris*, is calling for a renewal of Christian philosophy, a renewal

of Christian philosophizing. This way of philosophizing, as he says in the above text, “transcends the distinction of scholastic philosophy and scholastic theology.” This text is quite enlightening, given that Gilson had already called for a “return to theology.” Christian philosophy engaged in either of the two disciplines—and by this we should therefore read either of the two modes of Christian philosophy, as *ancilla theologiae* within theology and according to ends proper to the theologian or as *amicus theologiae* outside of theology and according to sub-theological ends of the attainment of truth—associates Christian faith with philosophizing. Hence, his explanation in *Le Philosophe et la Théologie* builds upon his definition in “What is Christian Philosophy?”, as it is a way of philosophizing which unites obedience to Christian faith with philosophical reasoning, whether one is a philosophizing Christian theologian employing Christian philosophy for the theological end of saving souls or a Christian philosopher as such, embracing the influence of Christianity through faith and grace but employing one’s philosophy for the sub-theological ends of leading souls on the path of truth through “open-house” means, with either a believer or a non-believer as interlocutor.

Such an understanding ties in with Pope St. John Paul II’s explanation of Christian philosophy in *Fides et Ratio*. In that encyclical, the Polish philosopher-saint notes two understandings of the relationship between philosophy and Christian faith. The first stance regards philosophy as being completely independent from the Gospel. The second, however, should be familiar to readers of the present essay. While explaining in what ways the first kind of philosophy can be legitimate, St. John Paul II juxtaposes it with a style or way of philosophizing which in fact he appears to be endorsing at the threshold of the Third Christian Millennium. He calls this way of philosophizing Christian philosophy:

A second stance adopted by philosophy is often designated as Christian philosophy. In itself, the term is valid, but it should not be misunderstood: it in no way intends to suggest that there is an official philosophy of the Church, since the faith as such is not a philosophy. The term seeks rather to indicate a Christian way of philosophizing, a philosophical speculation conceived in dynamic union with faith. It does not therefore refer simply to a philosophy developed by Christian philosophers who have striven in their research not to contradict the faith. The term Christian philosophy includes those important developments of philosophical thinking which would not have happened without the direct or indirect contribution of Christian faith. (John Paul II 1998, par. 76; emphasis added)

This explanation of Christian philosophy could not have been more faithful to Gilson's understanding of it in the latter's third stage. This Christian way of philosophizing, conceived in dynamic union with faith, is the "best way of philosophizing" envisioned by Pope Leo XIII and recovered by Gilson: one that unites obedience to Christian faith with philosophical reasoning, and that unifies the philosophical act with the life of grace, whether ordered toward the theological end of the salvation of souls or the sub-theological end of bringing those souls to the philosophical truth on the path toward salvation.

What, then, does this mean for a Christian philosophy of the Third Christian Millennium? Before addressing this question, let us turn back and review what we have achieved thus far.

## 5. CONCLUSION

We have seen, in sum, how Christian philosophy developed in the thought of Étienne Gilson over three stages. In one sense, for Gilson, such philosophy refers to a rational treatment of the content of the Catholic Faith: that is, the philosophical endeavor of seeking to understand that content of the Catholic faith amenable to comprehension. In this way, Christian philosophy is a rigorous philosophical treatment of the preambles of faith. Thus, Christianity influences the development of a Christian philosophy as a *quasi*-efficient cause suggesting starting points and topics for rational development, and possibly even for philosophical demonstration. Furthermore, Christian revelation acts in a regulative role steering the Christian philosopher away from error and toward the pathways of rational investigation most promising for finding truth. The influence of Christianity is not just limited to matters of faith, because the Christian's reason is nourished and restored in and by sacramental grace, so as to be able to pursue all the better philosophy as such. Still, Gilson's Christian philosophy in its most mature stage is an act and way of philosophizing performed in union with and in obedience to Christian faith. As an act, it is most especially ordered toward the Christian, theological end of the salvation of souls. In this way, Christian philosophy in the mode of *ancilla theologiae* is the philosophical component within theology itself. Gilson calls for a return to this mode of Christian philosophy not only for the benefit of Christian theology, but also for the greater benefit of a Christian philosophy as *amicus theologiae* ordered toward sub-theological ends, outside of theology, with an eye toward leading all of goodwill down the path of truth.

This, in turn, points us toward developing a Christian philosophy for the Third Christian Millennium. Given that Gilson's emphasis on the "return



to theology” confused many over the years into thinking that he had ruled out the possibility of any other mode of Christian philosophy, I think it best here to emphasize the validity and necessity of both modes of Christian philosophy in this new period of Western Civilization. While there should be philosophizing theologians who seek to develop the rational contents of the faith following in the footsteps of St. Thomas, there should also be Christian philosophers qua philosophers who embrace the guidance of Christian faith and grace in dialogue with philosophizing Christian theologians. In this way, a Christian philosophy for the Third Christian Millennium will in fact bring about a mutual fecundity for both Christian theology and Christian philosophy working as allies upon the common terrain of leading souls down the path of truth, a path that is completed in theology but which is done all the better with a well-tuned, robust Christian philosophy as a comrade. Let us continue to treat Christian theology and Christian philosophy as allies and friends in the common search for truth and salvation.

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