The Christianity of Philosophy

The title of this essay is meant to be rather startling, and more startling than the phrase “Christian philosophy” which provoked no little controversy some few years ago. That phrase was introduced by the medievalist Étienne Gilson to describe the contributions to philosophy of such thinkers as St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure. Gilson conceded to opponents that there could no more be a Christian philosophy, in the strict sense of the term, than a Christian mathematics or a Christian physics. All these studies were, in their formal idea, unconnected with matters of religious belief. But he insisted that as a matter of concrete historical fact the lived Christianity of certain medieval figures had led them to philosophical developments and discoveries that would not have been developed or discovered otherwise. In this sense, he declared, there could be Christian philosophies. It is not my intention to enter again on this controversy here. I draw attention to it merely to show how different my own topic of discussion is from Gilson’s. Gilson was concerned with the question whether there can be a philosophy that is Christian. I am concerned with the question whether there can be a philosophy that is not Christian.

Now this may seem a wholly bizarre question and one that it is easy to answer. For surely not only was Gilson right that philosophy is different from religion in its very idea, but also as a matter of historical fact there are many philosophies in the world that are not at all Christian. One thinks immediately of those of ancient Greece, China, and India, of those of the medieval Jewish and Islamic worlds, and of most of the philosophies of the modern day too. Well, perhaps. But I think my thesis, with a few qualifications, can be made to stand.

When philosophy is said to differ in its formal idea from religion, especially a professedly revealed religion like Christianity, what is typically meant is that philosophy is the study of things as they can be known by the light of unaided reason while religion, or, more precisely, theology, is the study of things as they can be known by the light of supernatural revelation. Clearly, if this is the way philosophy and religion are being understood then there is and can be no formal overlap between the two studies. There can, at most, be the sort of historical overlap in the concrete existence of individual thinkers that Gilson mentions and argues for. I want, however, to question this way of understanding philosophy or this way of defining its essential idea. For that definition is not and never was the definition of philosophy as that term was typically understood, at least up until the modern period.

Let me begin with the second-century Christian saint, Justin Martyr. Gilson appealed to Justin Martyr in his own discussion, but failed, in my view, to take Justin’s views seriously enough. Gilson, along with all the others involved in the controversy over Christian philosophy, was too wedded to the formal definition just mentioned to see that it did not apply in the case of Justin. Gilson recalls, for instance, how Justin went about from one professed philosopher to another in search of God and wisdom until he found an old man who instructed him in the teaching of the prophets and the Gospels. Justin
came to the conclusion that this was the only sure and profitable philosophy and he describes his conversion to Christianity as his becoming a philosopher.

It is evident from this, and from other texts, that Justin was not using the word “philosophy” in a way that distinguished it from the Christian faith. On the contrary, the Christian faith for him was the true and complete philosophy. It was what he had been looking for all along, and indeed what all philosophers had been looking for all along, namely the sure and true path of wisdom. Refusing to become a Christian was, for Justin, the same as refusing to remain a philosopher, and remaining a philosopher was ultimately the same as becoming a Christian. Moreover, and for the same reason, all philosophers before the coming of Christ were in some way already anticipating Christianity, and Christ was already, albeit in hidden ways, at work in the philosophers. What the prophets were to the Jews, the philosophers were to the Gentiles: forerunners sent by God to prepare the way for Christ. Indeed, did not the Gospel say that Christ was the Logos of God and the true light that enlightens all men? How then could it not have been Christ who had been illuminating the minds of the philosophers all these years, and how could it not have been Christ whom the philosophers, in seeking after wisdom, were really trying to find?

We should especially note about Justin’s understanding of philosophy its contrast with Gilson’s. For where Gilson defines philosophy by its instruments, Justin defines it by its end. Gilson limits philosophy to truths that can be known by means of reason on its own, but Justin includes under philosophy the whole of wisdom however it is found, whether by human speculation or as a revelation from God. That is why he understands Christianity as the true philosophy, the true “love of wisdom” – Christianity is the love of Christ and Christ is complete wisdom, the Logos of God who is Truth incarnate.

For Justin, therefore, as a self-professed lover of wisdom, what mattered was not how he found wisdom but whether he found it. The same must surely be true of any and every lover of wisdom. As Plato makes Socrates say already in the Republic, if someone is rightly said to love something then he loves the whole of it and not a part only. For what lover, who could not reach his love by his own strength and resources, would refuse the assistance of another who promised to bring him to his love by that other’s strength and resources? Or how genuine would the love of such a lover be if he gave up reaching his love because he could not get there on his own but only with another’s help?

Justin is perfectly typical among ancient authors in his understanding of philosophy. Ancient philosophy, from its beginnings in Greece, is always presented as a way of life, even of salvation. Of course philosophers had doctrines, and different doctrines; but they were committed to their particular doctrines or schools precisely because they saw them as guides to the best way of conducting themselves in the world. Philosophy was the way to enjoy the best and happiest life human nature allowed. Their pursuit was wisdom, and they pursued wisdom however they could, even giving up their lives and fortunes to the task. Wisdom was their “pearl of great price” for which they sold all that they had.
One thinks first and naturally of Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*, but most of those whom we call pre-Socratics were no different. One only has to think of how these pre-Socratics look upon their philosophy as an escape and release from the ignorance and folly in which the rest of mankind, the unphilosophic mass, lies imprisoned. We often obscure this fact to ourselves by saying that the pre-Socratics were the first scientists and by contrasting their approach to understanding the world with that of poets and other tellers of tales about the gods. But this is misleading if the suggestion is meant to be, as it often is, that the pre-Socratics were thereby separating themselves and their reasoning from religion and religious faith. We indeed may contrast philosophy and science against religion and faith; but the pre-Socratics did not. The reputed founder of philosophy, Thales, believed as much in the gods as any pagan. Parmenides presents his own teaching as a revelation from a goddess, which would make it, according to our categories, religion and not philosophy. Even Xenophanes, who first criticized the traditional tales about the gods, was not replacing religion with reason but with another religion, exchanging an absurd and immoral religion for a sane and moral one; yet a sane and moral religion is, according to us, still religion and not philosophy. When we skip from the pre-Socratics to Plato we find very much the same. He follows Xenophanes in rejecting traditional myths and in substituting rational deities for irrational. He also understands philosophy as an all-embracing way of life or path of salvation and as culminating in some sort of worship of the divine.

Of course the pre-Socratics, Socrates, and Plato were doing something new that the poets had not done. But what they did, as John Paul II reminded us in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, was not to reject religion or faith but to introduce reason into religion and faith. Greek religion was very fluid and tolerant of novelties. The philosophers simply appealed to reason in their faith instead of to traditional tales or personal interest or realpolitik. A classic instance is Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*, where the difference between Socrates and Euthyphro is not that Euthyphro is pious and Socrates is not but that Socrates uses his head in his piety while Euthyphro uses anything but his head.

What is true of Plato and Socrates is just as true of Aristotle. It is true also of all the philosophic schools of the Greek and Roman world – Stoics, Epicureans, Neoplatonists – in whom indeed the most obvious feature is their religious and salvific character. The philosophers, we might say, were *more* serious about religion than most of their fellows, since they insisted on using their reason for this purpose instead of relying blindly on their hopes and fears.

Viewed in this light Justin must be looked on as a fellow philosopher, a fellow seeker after wisdom, and the Christianity he embraced must be looked on as another school of philosophy. That Christianity also claimed to be a teaching given by God Himself come for this purpose in human form does not make it, according to the ancient understanding, any the less a philosophy or any the less attractive as a philosophy. Indeed, if anything its claim to be a revelation from God would make it more attractive. Since the divine is manifestly better than the human, divine wisdom is better than human wisdom. Certainly Parmenides would have had no problem with this, nor would Socrates. For he who
declared at his trial that he had learned through his obedience to the Delphic Oracle that human wisdom was of little worth would not have spurned the gift of divine wisdom if the Oracle had offered it to him.

This is why Justin is such an important witness to how Christianity first presented itself to the pagan philosophers – and how it won them over. For Christianity came on the scene as complete wisdom, available in this life as a free gift from the same God that the philosophers had always claimed to love and to be pursuing. The philosophic spirits who came to see this, among whom Justin is a prime instance, embraced Christianity as philosophy and as philosophers. There was no conflict or division for them between philosophy and religion, philosophy and faith. Indeed how could there be? Wisdom was what, as philosophers, they had always wanted. How then could it matter to them if wisdom was to be received as a free gift from God and not as a result of their own speculations?

This attitude of Justin towards Christianity and his identifying of Christianity with philosophy, true philosophy, continues in his contemporaries and successors, such as Athenagoras, Irenaeus, Minucius Felix, Clement, and outstandingly, of course, St. Augustine. Thus it is that the ultimate triumph of Christianity and the eventual decline and disappearance of the ancient pagan philosophic schools is viewed as the triumph of philosophy itself. This was the triumph of Christ who is Wisdom, and of the love of Christ that is the love of Wisdom. The other philosophies ended, therefore, not by way of cessation but by way of completion; they were succeeded not by new pagan schools, but by Christian theology. There was no break between philosophy and theology, just as there was no break between the prophets and the Gospels. There was only fulfillment and realization.

Such at any rate is how the history of philosophy must appear to a Justin or an Augustine or indeed to any reflective Christian of like mind. Of course this is not how the history of philosophy is standardly presented these days. On the contrary, philosophy is often considered to have ceased rather than to have been superseded after the ascendance of Christianity, not to be revived until around the time of Descartes, when the hegemonic power of an authoritarian Church had begun to decline. This understanding of the history of philosophy distorts ancient philosophy, seeing it as a set of doctrines covering a certain range of subjects somewhat loosely connected, rather than as a comprehensive way to salvation. Ancient philosophy, in this distorting narrative, is seen as an anticipation, albeit rather primitive at times, of what we call philosophy now. But what we call philosophy now has little more than the name in common with philosophy as it existed in the ancient world. We are confronted by a serious problem of equivocation.

The equivocation is not entirely accidental; indeed it has its roots in the philosophy of the ancient schools as they were first rivaled and then absorbed by Christianity. For while, as I have stressed, philosophy just meant love of wisdom, the fact that Christianity claimed to be, in the form of divine gift, the wisdom thus loved forced Christians in particular to wonder how much of this wisdom was or could be known prior to the gift.
Some early Christian writers took the bold step of saying that the Greek philosophers, and Plato in particular, had gotten their philosophy from the Old Testament through contact with Jews. Hence philosophy could be reduced to biblical prophecy and treated in the same way, namely, as elements of divine revelation about the future coming of Christ. But this was an unsatisfactory solution, partly because of lack of evidence about early Greek knowledge of the Bible, and partly because it left open the question of whether anything could in principle be known without any prior revelation. For human reason did exist after all and, moreover, as the opening of St. John’s Gospel seemed to make clear, received its light from Christ at the very origin of its being. So what was the relation between the light of Christ that “enlightens every man... coming into the world” and the light of Christ present in the gospel? The answer became part of Christian apologetics: the thought of the philosophers contained, not the gospel, but a preparation for the gospel, not the faith, but “preambles” to the faith. The whole was still wisdom and the love of it was still philosophy as love of wisdom. But there was a difference between the complete wisdom revealed by God and the preambles to this wisdom discovered by the pre–Christian philosophers.

Of course no true lover of wisdom, no true philosopher, could rest content with the preambles when wisdom itself was available. Philosophy, therefore, in its complete sense, or with respect to its ultimate longing, was still understood as identical with revealed Christian wisdom. But the philosophy that the ancient philosophers had managed to reach was and could only be understood as the preambles to this wisdom. There was a natural tendency, therefore, to call the preambles themselves philosophy, since that was all that the philosophers had actually achieved. But further, since the philosophers had achieved this using their reason alone, or using only the natural light from Christ (for the revealed light was not yet given), there was a natural tendency to identify the philosophy of the philosophers, as opposed to the philosophy of the Christians, with what can be known by natural reason. At the same time, there was a natural tendency to identify the philosophy of the Christians with theology or revealed theology. In the end this distinction became fully formalized and clarified, so that while theology came to be what could be known with the light of revelation, philosophy came to be, not just what the pagan philosophers had known by reason, but what they might have known because it is knowable by unaided reason, even if no philosopher had in fact known it or known it very well. St. Thomas Aquinas was perhaps the Christian theologian who most clearly and succinctly formalized this distinction. One of the consequences was that it became possible for Christian theologians to discover rational conclusions that no philosopher had discovered and yet for these truths to be strictly “philosophical,” that is, accessible to reason alone (and this is in part what Gilson had in mind by what he called Christian philosophy).

Philosophy in this narrow sense, where it is, for purposes of formal clarification, identified with the preambles to Christian wisdom, was reached by prescinding from the lived context of ancient philosophy and from the lived love of wisdom that motivated ancient philosophers. It was, and was meant to be, an abstraction. But the Christian theologians who formalized the abstraction did not love wisdom differently from the pagans or pursue wisdom any less passionately. On the contrary, the pursuit and the love
were massively reinforced by Christianity, since the wisdom that is Christ became the
pursued and the loved. Moreover the abstraction was not of philosophy from something
else, but of philosophy from philosophy: the philosophy accessible to unaided reason
from the more complete philosophy revealed by Christ.

Philosophy understood as what is accessible to unaided reason is, in its full formalization,
an abstraction fashioned during the Middle Ages, above all by Christian theologians. It
cannot be found in the ancient world, nor in the early Christian world, nor in much of
Judaism and Islam. Yet this is the sense of philosophy that has now come to dominate in
our modern world, and it is practitioners of this philosophy who fill the teaching posts in
the schools and universities. They it is also who write the books, especially the books that
describe and analyze the so-called “history of philosophy,” from which most people learn
about philosophy.

One should not be too surprised, therefore, if the other and original sense of philosophy –
as a way of life and a path to wisdom and salvation – has been almost entirely lost to
view. For few there are who consider philosophy to be a path to salvation, let alone live
out their philosophy as such. There are plenty of Christians around, of course, and Jews
and Muslims too, who try to live out their faith and who are, to this extent, the authentic
counterparts today of ancient philosophic practice. But we do not dream of calling them
philosophers anymore. Nor do modern practitioners of philosophy who also espouse such
faith think of themselves as philosophers insofar as they do espouse it. Philosophy, both
in theory and practice, has become thoroughly abstracted from the living out of a way of
salvation. It has instead become an academic subject and the practice of it a job or
profession.

Philosophy did not exist like this in the past, not even in the medieval world that
constructed the modern idea of philosophy – to say nothing of the ancient world. The
abstraction of philosophy was never more than a formal idea; it was not a lived reality.
The lived reality, within which philosophy was always concretely practiced, was
Christianity or some other religion expressly claiming to be a way of salvation. What
happened in the modern world is that the formal abstraction was made concrete. This was
essentially achieved by keeping the philosophic practice but rejecting the religious
context. The practice became instead this-worldly and secular. One would expect a
religious context to be otherworldly, of course, but philosophy when practiced as a way
of life is always otherworldly, in the sense that it is not focused on immediate goals like
money, pleasure, fame, and so forth. True philosophers know these goals are too low to
be the focus of a way of life. The only adequate goal of philosophy is philosophy itself,
or the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge for its own sake. Anyone who makes his life
revolve around such pursuit has chosen an otherworldly life, even if the expectation of a
life after this one is not added in.

Modern philosophy is typically said to begin with Descartes. On the whole this is true,
but not for the reasons usually given. Descartes was not restoring philosophy after a
thousand-year interruption during the Middle Ages. Philosophy in its original sense
flourished as much or more during the Middle Ages than before, because it flourished in
Christian wisdom, and in Jewish and Islamic wisdom too. What Descartes in fact did was to take part of this wisdom, the part that had, for technical purposes, been called philosophy, and remove it from its theological and religious context. He removed it, that is to say, from the context where it was still continuous with a way of life and of salvation or with the life-long love of wisdom. In other words he made it expressly this-worldly. So much is evident from the fact that he made it serve the cause of the new science and that he made the new science, as he says in his *Discourse on Method*, serve the cause of the conquest of nature for human comfort.

Descartes was not, therefore, a philosopher in the traditional sense. At least he was not so in his explicit philosophizing (what he was in the secret of his own heart is another matter). He used philosophy in the sense abstracted by the medieval theologians, not for the sake of wisdom or theology, but for the sake of worldly success. To this extent his philosophizing bears more of a resemblance to that of the ancient sophists, who did not pursue philosophy as a way of life but used it rather as a means to wealth and reputation.

Descartes, however, was not alone. There were many others at about the same time who followed the same path. The emergence of philosophy as an academic subject, abstracted from the context of a way of life, is due to them. For of the two moments of medieval wisdom, theology and philosophy, the theological moment was of no or little value to Descartes because it was not *useful* or not this-worldly. Academic philosophy as we now know it was born as the concretizing of a medieval abstraction and indeed also as the handmaid of technological science for the conquest of nature. The history of modern philosophy is the history of that concretized abstraction and of that handmaid.

But an abstraction is an abstraction and to concretize it is willy-nilly to put it into a context. Hence as a matter of fact academic philosophers will have a context for their philosophizing. It will serve some end. Perhaps in some cases it will serve the end of philosophy or wisdom itself, in which case it will be like ancient philosophy and hence also like religion. The philosophizing of a Hegel or a Heidegger would seem to be of this sort (though we might question how wise is the supposed wisdom that results). In other cases, however, it will serve whatever end the philosopher in question adopts for his life: wealth, pleasure, fame, or just plain making ends meet.

For the most part, in fact, that does seem to be how philosophy today actually gets used. It is just another sort of profession, like being a stockbroker or a businessman. It has lost what John Paul II calls in *Fides et Ratio* its “sapiential dimension,” its dimension as wisdom and as living for the sake of wisdom. To restore that dimension does not require, however, that we give up the medieval abstraction, nor indeed that we give up the idea of philosophy as a profession. Nor of course is that what John Paul II wants either. He uses the medieval abstraction in *Fides et Ratio* regularly, much as we all do now when speaking of philosophy. For the abstraction is after all an important one that introduces necessary clarifications into our thinking. Indeed I would call the abstraction a real discovery of Christian philosophy in Gilson’s sense – a discovery by grace-filled reason of something that belongs to unaided reason. Moreover, once the abstraction has been made, there can be nothing wrong in choosing to concentrate one’s professional activity
on philosophy and not also on its sapiential completion in theology. For the two are formally separate and can be pursued separately.

Rather what philosophy requires is what true religion has always required of human beings – not a change in profession but a change in person. Whether we profess philosophy or theology or neither, whether we are in religious life or not, our persons and our lives should serve the ultimate goal of wisdom. We should all be philosophers in the original sapiential sense that John Paul II so much speaks of, but we need not all be philosophers in the abstract medieval sense. We can have Descartes as our guide, if we like, for what it means to do philosophy. But we should have Justin Martyr as our guide for what it means to be a philosopher.