

Faith, Philosophy, and Fidelity

By Germain Grisez

To some, the very idea of a Christian philosophy seems absurd. My view is that expressions such as "Christian philosophy" are meaningful and that Christian faith and philosophy not only are compatible but complementary. In a real sense, they need one another. I believe that neither Christian faith nor philosophy can flourish without an intimate, mutual relationship. Many will disagree, and I wish to reach some understanding with them.

When I say "reach some understanding," I do not mean "come to a single view." That would be too much to expect. By "reach some understanding" I mean "reach an accurate and sympathetic appreciation of one another's views," even though these views may continue to differ.

To come to an accurate and sympathetic appreciation of one another's differing views is not easy. We must first resist temptations to think one another, inasmuch as we disagree, simply odd, stupid, or ill willed. Then we must make an effort — an effort never easy — to bracket our own deepest beliefs and fears so that we can put ourselves intellectually in one another's places, for the sake of understanding. (Surely we can never begin to understand one another if we persist in injecting our own suppositions into our formulations of one another's views.) Finally, to come to a genuine understanding of one another's differing views, we must try to establish and maintain mutual sympathy and respect. If we do not agree, we must nevertheless allow credit for the plausibility of the reasons and the sincerity of the intentions which lead us to differ.

Why should the expression "Christian philosophy" be problematic? We speak of British philosophy and German philosophy, of ancient philosophy and contemporary philosophy. Why cannot we speak as easily of Christian philosophy?

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Clearly, the cases are not alike. "British" and German," "ancient" and "contemporary" locate philosophy in a cultural setting. No one doubts that philosophy could exist somehow — perhaps not equally well — in diverse cultural settings. Some people do think that philosophy can exist in a cultural setting characterized as "Christian" but deny that genuine philosophy can accept "Christian" or any similar qualification as an intrinsic characterization. Other people do not think that genuine philosophy can even exist in a Christian setting, except as a revolutionary force for intellectual and spiritual liberation.

FAITH & PHILOSOPHY COMPLEMENTARY

It should be noted that on their own diverse grounds various groups would agree in rejecting my view that Christian faith and philosophy are complementary. Christians who are not philosophers might object on several grounds to the view that Christian faith and philosophy need one another. They might regard philosophy as idle speculation or a mere game, irrelevant to the serious business of preaching and living the gospel. They might regard philosophy as a threat to faith, inasmuch as philosophy cultivates a spirit of unrestricted inquiry, critical of all unquestionable presuppositions. Again, non-philosophic Christians sometimes regard philosophy as a poor substitute for faith, or even as a scheme of rationalizations built by nonbelievers to support their refusal to believe.

Philosophers who are not Christians will object to my thesis on other grounds. Some believe that a Christian act of faith is irrational, and hence incompatible with the enlightened attitude philosophy requires. Some regard religious faith in general as an inadequate, poetic expression of truths which philosophy alone articulates adequately. Again, some philosophers who are not Christians are convinced that Christians cannot refrain from mixing dogma into philosophic inquiry and religious indoctrination into the teaching of philosophy.

Even some who are both philosophers and Christians will object to the proposition that Christian faith and philosophy are complementary. Some regard their Christianity as a personal, practical, and private commitment

and their philosophy as a professional, public, theoretical activity. Some evacuate their Christian faith of intellectual content to such an extent that their philosophic perspective dominates their religious outlook. Some regard Christian faith as the actual foundation of their lives and engage in philosophy only as a kind of game.

These various views are not mere possibilities. I have known people who accept each of these views of the relationship between Christian faith and philosophy. Obscurantism is far from dead among Christians; anti-religious secularism flourishes in the intellectual world; and many Christians who are in philosophy do their best to keep these two aspects of their lives compartmentalized.

I can understand, sympathize with, and even agree up to a point with those who hold each of the views I have mentioned. Life is complicated. Both philosophy and Christianity have many aspects, including a variety of perversions and imperfect forms. For either philosophy or Christianity to exist at all, some human beings must think certain things, care about certain things, see the world and themselves in certain special ways, and commit themselves to purposes that others need not share — to purposes, in fact, which most other people do not share.

In other words, both philosophy and Christianity come to be and are what they are only in cultural contexts; neither philosophy nor Christianity is a naturally given entity in the sense that a skunk, a potash deposit, or a bolt of lightning is a naturally given entity. Thus, it is not at all surprising that the families of uses of both "philosophy" and "Christianity" are difficult to map, and that the area in which the two families border each other is subject to considerable dispute.



For this reason, I do not deny that in many senses of "philosophy" and of "Christian faith" the two are incompatible. But I think that Christian faith and philosophy can be compatible and even complementary. I will try to defend this view by offering some brief reflections to clarify what I mean by both terms. I do not think my use of either expression is idiosyncratic, but leave judgment on that to the reader.

When I was a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Chicago during the 1950s, there was a wide variety of philosophic approaches represented among the faculty of the department, hardly any of which appeared to be shaped by a religious commitment. The pluralism present among the faculty of that department had the

very healthy result of compelling the members to develop explicit standards of philosophic competence independent of agreement in the same views or even commitment to the same methods of philosophizing. Thus students were judged on grounds other than their docility as disciples or their allegiance to philosophic styles.

Under such conditions, many other Christian students and I found that department a most stimulating and worthwhile place to study, a place where we could meet standards of philosophic competence without feeling compelled to compromise or conceal religious beliefs for the sake of philosophic acceptability. In such an atmosphere no one — whether a believer in traditional religious teachings or a skeptic in regard to them — was immune from critical scrutiny.

My experience at Chicago explains why I see the question of Christian faith and philosophy as I do. I see the issue neither primarily in terms of a dialectic of faith and reason, nor primarily in terms of confrontations between ecclesiastical authority and intellectual freedom, but rather primarily as a matter of personal integration. I wish to be both a philosopher and a Christian; I am willing to forgo neither way of life for the other. The question thus becomes: How can one understand Christianity and philosophy as ways of life and live them integrally?

My experience is that I could not live either way of life without the other, and that is why I regard the two as complementary. Thus I attempt in what follows only to articulate the experience of my own life.

Philosophy, obviously, exists in philosophic works. Any university library has a substantial section of them. But these works were not only the product of philosophical thinking; they cannot be understood and made to come to life again without new philosophical thinking. Thus the activity of philosophizing is more basic than the work; the performance is prior to the product. Philosophic activity itself, moreover, cannot be understood simply as a sequence of performances each complete in itself. The philosopher's behavior in his chosen role is unified by a basic interest, a single attitude, and an unfolding commitment. The quest for wisdom is a continuous journey which ends not in this life.

CHRISTIANITY A COMMITMENT

Christianity, too, is a commitment to a journey of the soul which ends not in this life. Christianity seeks to unite humankind to Jesus, who is the way to communion with God. Jesus, moreover, represents himself as truth and wisdom; thus, one who accepts Jesus on his own terms must make a commitment to truth and the love of wisdom.

The fact that philosophy and Christianity can both be conceived of as commitments to a pursuit of wisdom not to be completed in this life might seem to point toward conflict rather than toward complementarity between the two. Must not philosophy seek to reduce all religious faith to the boundaries of human reason and experience, and must not Christian faith resist that reduction?

Certainly, there is inevitable tension. Moreover, it is clear that some philosophic positions have claimed to encompass religious faith in frameworks it cannot but resist.

Hegel, for example, developed an all-embracing system in which Christian faith was treated as a moment in the unfolding of Absolute Spirit. For Hegel, religious language expresses in a symbolic manner the universality of truth which philosophy alone — that is, Hegel's philosophy alone — brings to rational explicitness. As Kierkegaard made clear, Christian faith cannot accept the place Hegel assigned it if it wishes to preserve its own identity. But, then, subsequent philosophy has made it clear that Christian faith is not alone in having to resist the imperialism of Hegel's all-embracing reason.

Religious faith, especially Christian faith, is a commitment. It involves accepting as certain positions for which one has no compelling direct evidence and no inescapable argument. Philosophy, by contrast, must be ready to question everything. No presuppositions are sacred. Does it not follow that one who tries to follow simultaneously both the Christian and the philosophic ways of life is trying to live a contradiction? Am I not trying to be at once both closed-minded and open-minded, a partisan believer and a free inquirer, a submissive son of the Church and an autonomous person come of age?

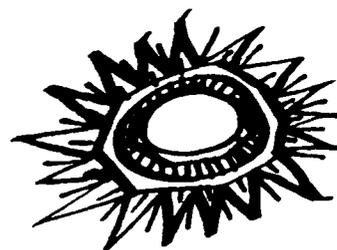
My answer is: Yes, I am trying to have it both ways. And in formulating the alternatives I have not tried to soften the opposition which would be felt to be a devastating antinomy by anyone who would actually make this objection. I know what such a person feels; I am not immune from the tension the objection expresses. I feel it too, perhaps more acutely. At times I have felt inwardly torn, as one feels when two persons whom one loves quarrel and both demand that one choose between them. But I ask: Should one give in to such a demand?

I think the answer must be: No. If one genuinely loves two persons, one cannot choose between them; one must be faithful to both of them. Faithfulness in such a case requires that one not give up hope that the alienation of the two friends from one another, however deep and irremediable it may seem, can in reality be overcome. Faithfulness in such a case requires that one make of oneself a bridge, and take on oneself the risk of being torn apart, always hoping confidently to survive intact.

Similarly, I consider it the responsibility of the person who is both a Christian and a philosopher to remain faithful to both ways of life, to resist all demands from either side to choose between them, to deny nothing for the sake of lessening the tension, and thus to become a bridge between the gathering of those sons and daughters of the Church who believe and those men and women who philosophize.

I said above that I accept the force of the objection that I am trying to have it both ways. But I do not grant that an attempt to follow at once both the Christian and the philosophic ways of life is an attempt to live a contradiction.

If the only way to begin philosophizing were with uni-



versal doubt, with total abandonment of all presuppositions, then philosophic life and Christian life would be absolutely at odds. However, I do not think that philosophy can begin with universal doubt. In fact, philosophers who imagine that their thinking is altogether presuppositionless have not managed to set aside all presuppositions, but only to render themselves unaware of their presuppositions, the better to keep them without subjecting them to critical scrutiny.

PRIOR PRINCIPLES

Before we begin to philosophize, before we are out of adolescence, we must in practice settle ourselves in some stand or other toward life and reality as a whole. Are there really basic principles of right and wrong which demand and deserve our respect, our humble submission? Must we seek these and accept them if we can find them? Or are there no ultimate sources of meaning and value beyond human decisions? In other words, are there prior principles by which our choices are measured, or are human persons, as intelligent and free, the whole measure of right and wrong?

Not everyone reflects on this issue clearly, abstractly, and in general terms. But practically, concretely, in particular situations all of us have committed ourselves to one possibility or the other. Either alternative is pregnant with significance for our whole understanding of reality and our place in it.

If there are no principles of meaning and value beyond ourselves, then we must be careful to exclude from our picture of reality any superior being, such as the creator-God of Judeo-Christian faith. Moreover, if there are not to be principles of meaning and value beyond ourselves, then we must circumscribe meaning and value within the dimensions of our own capacities, and must imagine our capacities to be great enough to account for all the meaning and value we acknowledge.

But if there are principles of meaning and value beyond ourselves, we must suppose that reality contains an adequate ground to them, and that our powers include the ability to find them and submit to them, not as an act of self-mutilation, but as an act of self-fulfillment by responsible acceptance of reality.

My point is that everyone of us, before we reached adulthood, before we undertook any critical reflection, already had made practical commitments — usually implicit ones — regarding the ultimate questions philosophy confronts. Christian faith surely proposes a response to

these questions. But just as surely, other responses to these questions also are acts of faith — whether they be religious or not, and, if not, whether they be nihilist, Marxist, or liberal secular humanist.

Commitment comes before reflection, certitude before criticism. The question is not whether we have faith, but what faith we have, and whether we admit to ourselves and others that we believe, or conceal this fact from ourselves and try to conceal it from others. One great advantage of Christian faith is that it is self-conscious. As a Christian I know — and others also know — what beliefs are in play as I philosophize. It would be a great advantage if liberal secular humanists, who are always alert to dogmatism among religious believers, were equally conscious of their own faith-commitments, for then they could put their own cards squarely on the table.

I do not suggest that philosophy can be satisfied with my initial faith-position or any other. But I do suggest that when religious believers and those who reject religious belief enter the philosophic arena together, the articles of religious faith should not be excluded as nonsense while the elements of nonreligious faith are admitted with the status of unquestionable presuppositions of the entire philosophical combat.

The historical situation since the Age of the Enlightenment has been that the dogmas of unbelief have assumed the status of absolute truths so sacred it has been felt indecent for any member of the intellectual community to call them into question. I do not wish to seem indecent, but I fail to see why the prejudices of the intellectual world of two centuries ago should enjoy immunity from critical scrutiny as careful as that to which any other faith-position is subjected.

If we acknowledge that all who enter the philosophic arena are alike in bringing along their prephilosophic faith — whether or not that faith be religious — it may be possible to begin to make sense of what goes on in philosophy. Philosophy is a free-for-all in which everyone tries to unfold his or her initial position, to defend it, to compel others to confront all of the implications of their positions, and to bring to bear anything which will rationally discredit the positions of others.

This description of what goes on in the philosophic arena may not be attractive — one must be perverse to see beauty in bloody combat — but the picture is essentially accurate. Yet it is only one side of the story.

The other side is that philosophic encounter traditionally has been carried on as limited warfare, with weapons restricted to the evidence and rational argumentation which are in principle accessible to everyone. Moreover, philosophers have put a high premium on behavior in accord with a version of the Golden Rule: Expect to get as good as you give, listen as much as you talk, and be ready to yield to sorts of argument you regard as cogent against others.

In sum, philosophers have prephilosophic commitments and work from them. But they do not permit one another to rest in them. The difference between philosophy and dogmatism is that philosophers open themselves

to being moved by the dimensions of reality they have not yet grasped, while unphilosophic dogmatists think themselves to be so totally in possession of reality that if anyone must move, it must be someone else.

RELATIVIST DOGMA

Relativists are superficially unlike other dogmatists. Relativists say that everyone is entitled to the world to which he is committed, and thus no one need move. If some refuse to content themselves with their private corners of reality, however, relativists unveil their underlying dogmatism. They then argue that every non-relativist position is but a point of view, an angular vision, or a perspective on reality, while relativism alone reveals the relativity of all points of view in a synoptic vision which preserves and delivers the whole of reality.

Relativism is the kind of dogmatism most common today. Christians entering the philosophical arena are not likely to encounter others claiming to know and be able to prove the Truth about Reality, to show that this Truth is incompatible with Christian faith, and that therefore Christians must give up their faith or their commitment to truth.

But Christians are likely to encounter many people who are committed to perspectival theories of language or of thought, to theories of personal knowledge through commitment, or to theories of philosophy as ideology. If such relativists are dogmatic in their relativism, they are likely to dismiss Christians as dogmatists with whom argument is impossible, simply because Christians cannot agree to play the game by rules which guarantee they will lose.

But what if someone who does not share my faith does agree to enter the philosophic lists with me subject to rules I consider fair? Has he or she not had to concede a position which guarantees beforehand that I win? No.

I have been using metaphors drawn from battle and competitive sport. Such metaphors are useful up to a point, but every analogy breaks down if pushed too far. Philosophy is more serious than a game, because one puts one's identity to the test whenever one enters a philosophical argument.

At the same time, philosophy ought to be loving combat — to adopt an expression of Karl Jaspers — not all-out war. Communication is not merely a means in philosophy; a community sharing in wisdom is its end. This surely was Plato's view, expressed very clearly in his dialogues. Although philosophers disagree about what philosophy is, few say that Plato was not a philosopher.

The lesson of Plato's dialogues is that no one who loves wisdom really loses an argument. Loving intellectual combat is a process of growth; communication unites partial and inadequate insights in an ever-widening and more fully shared comprehensive understanding. The only losers in philosophic dialogue, as Plato represents it, are dogmatics, including dogmatic relativists such as the Sophists, who care nothing for truth and are ready to defend their initial positions to the death.

But do we not come at this point to the precise difference between the believing Christian and nonreligious persons who come to philosophy with a certain practical faith, ready to put their prephilosophic convictions to the test? Do not Christians claim a certitude for their faith which utterly closes the way to philosophic inquiry?

I answer only for myself. I do hold the Catholic faith with a certitude that admits of no doubt as to its truth. And I am aware that in this regard my situation is different from that of many others who come to philosophy with beliefs to which they are practically committed but about which they are nevertheless theoretically uncertain.

CERTITUDE DOES NOT PRECLUDE INQUIRY

Yet certitude does not preclude honest inquiry. The motto of Christian philosophy is not faith at rest, but faith in quest of understanding. If I claimed both to be certain in my faith and to be in full possession of its meaning, I would have nothing to seek. But the certitude of Christian faith is a certitude about things Christians do not claim to understand, the certitude of standing firmly in mystery.

Nevertheless, does not this certitude preclude any development which would be in conflict with my initial faith-position? Have I not committed myself at the outset to the Christian faith, and must I not therefore be ready to hide from evidence, stifle reason, even deny the truth in obedience to faith?

No, these consequences do not follow. I do not believe that Christian faith and the certitude of truth achieved in any other manner can ever come into conflict. Therefore, I do not consider the issue as formulated a real one. I do not stand in Christian faith simply in virtue of an accident of birth though in fact I was born a Catholic — but because I have chosen and continued to choose to stand in this faith. And I choose to stand in it because I believe it is a way toward truth and light. I stand in Christian faith to walk in it.

I must be ready to entertain hypothetical propositions. If I were convinced by evidence and argument that Christian faith is false, would I then wish to remain in it? No. If I could be a son of God only by ceasing to be a man, would I choose to be a son of God? No.

But I do not think these are real issues. Christians do not believe that God asks human persons to abandon their humanity. Christians believe, rather, that the Word of God condescended to share our humanity, and share it fully, so that we might be able to share his divinity without abandoning our human condition and its possibilities.

Despite the certitude of my Christian faith I do not claim that I have any unavoidable evidence or cogent argument directly demonstrating it to be true. I cannot say that its falsity is logically impossible or empirically impossible. I therefore must be open to evidence and argument which seem to conflict with what I believe. And I must remain ready to have my faith overcome, while being certain that it cannot be overcome.

Again, a paradox. But consider an analogy. My wife



and I have been happily married for more than thirty years. During this whole time, we have been faithful to one another. Out of respect for our own rationality we must be ready to have our faith in one another overcome; yet we are certain that it will not be overcome.

FAITH AND FIDELITY

But is this comparison between my faith as a Christian and my fidelity as a husband anything more than a weak analogy? Marital faith is a matter of trust; it is personal confidence in the love of another person. Religious faith is a matter of intellectual assent to the doctrines of one's Church. Catholic faith, for example, is assent to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Thus marital faith and Christian faith seem altogether different.

But I do not think they are. Certainly, faith in one's husband or wife is personal confidence in his or her love. But my beloved is not for me merely a body, nor an inaccessible consciousness, nor an incommunicable selfhood. No, my beloved is she who is with me, who reveals herself to me, who manifests herself in words and deeds of love. What she tells me cannot be put to any further decisive test, yet it manifests her reality, and I accept her self-revelation as truth.

My wife is, not exclusively yet really, her statement, "I love you"; my faith in her includes belief in the truth of that statement. I do not say that my faith in her is nothing but believing a proposition. But it would be nonsense to say that I have faith in my wife but disbelieve what she tells me about herself. "I love you" is a dogmatic definition of our marriage. Our mutual assurance of our belief in each other's love is the credo of our life together.

Christian faith, likewise, is belief in Jesus, who revealed himself to people of his time, told them who he conceived himself to be and what he conceived his vocation to be. They accepted or rejected him. Those who accepted him believed in him as a person, put their faith and hope in him, and loved him. Included in this faith was their belief in what he said. It would have been nonsense for them to have said they believed in him but did not believe what he said about himself.

It is quite possible to know and love others without ever meeting them face to face. One can consider oneself

a friend of Socrates, one can join in argument with him. Plato made him immortal. In a somewhat similar way — not exactly the same way — the Gospels make Jesus our contemporary, and we can learn to know and love him, even though we do not meet him face to face. The Christian community unites those who encounter Jesus, who accept him, and who sustain the culture in which the Gospel is a living word whose meaning continues to unfold through the course of centuries.

It is in this context that we must understand Christian faith in the articles of the Creed. These articles spell out in a different form some of the central elements of the claims Jesus made about himself. To believe in Jesus, therefore, is to accept the truth of these articles, precisely insofar as they reflect the mystery which Jesus made known through his words and deeds — especially through his passion, death, and resurrection.

A Christian who is not a Catholic might well object at this point that the teaching of the Catholic Church is considerably more extensive than the articles of the Creed, and that the Catholic also accepts the teaching authority of the pope and other bishops. This teaching authority seems superfluous to other Christians — and seems so today even to some who regard themselves as Catholics.

This objection opens up some large and important questions which I cannot adequately discuss here. These questions, in any case, are not so central to the present topic as are some of the issues already treated. Still, I should like to venture a few brief remarks.

PHILOSOPHY NECESSARY TO CHRISTIANITY

Catholic tradition is different from other Christian traditions in regarding philosophic reflection as necessary for the life of faith. I do not mean that the Catholic Church holds that every single Christian must be a professional philosopher. But the Catholic Church has always shown very clearly that it regards philosophic reflection as essential for the unfolding of the meaning of faith, for its defense, and for its teaching. If philosophy is the human quest for wisdom and if Jesus is ultimate wisdom who has accepted the human condition to reveal God to us, then Christian faith seeking understanding has more reason for philosophizing than has any other faith. Such philosophizing unfolds the meaning of faith age after age, and thus each new era enjoys a fresh expression of the original revelation.

It follows that Christian doctrine as Catholics understand it has developed, must develop, and will continue to develop until the end of time. And the medium of this development is a human effort which cannot dispense with philosophizing. The result has been an accumulation of doctrine, which never annuls the simplicity of the Gospels or the majestic summaries of the Creeds, but unfolds the meaning of faith with a free yet disciplined creativity.

Much more would have to be said to explain fully and defend this view, but I think I have said enough to indicate why I regard philosophy as essential to Catholic

faith. Of course, once creativity is admitted to the life of Christian faith, a guarantee of fidelity also must be admitted. It is in these terms that I think the role of the ecclesiastical teaching authority must be understood. The pope does not tell me how to philosophize, but the Catholic Church, by means of the pope, does tell me when a certain way of talking will be acceptable among Catholics as a development of the language of faith.

If the complementarity of Christian faith and philosophy, as I understand the two ways of life, is by now sufficiently explained from the side of faith, there remains, finally, the question of how I think my philosophic work benefits from my faith.

As I explained above, I am not dealing with the two terms of the problem absolutely and abstractly. But I trust that in trying to articulate my understanding of my own life, I am using neither “philosophy” nor “Christian faith” in an idiosyncratic way. I am not announcing an *auto-da-fé* against philosophers who do not share my faith, but I am asking for an equal opportunity to participate in the philosophic argument, regardless of the suspicions my professor of Catholic faith raises in those who do not share it. Having entered this caveat, I can briefly summarize the role my faith plays in my philosophic effort.

First, my Catholic faith is my philosophic point of departure. Others certainly can begin philosophy from their different faiths. But no one can begin philosophy without some faith. I have argued this point above and will not elaborate on it.

Second, my faith is for me an additional stimulus to philosophize. I wish to understand what I believe, and this desire intensifies wonder, the exhilaration of philosophic argument, and the joy of insight which motivate every philosopher. The role of Christian faith in stimulating philosophic reflection also was considered above.

My third and final point was not considered above, and I shall merely state it as a point of departure for subsequent discussion. Christian faith allows me to hope that the effort of philosophy is not hopeless. If I did not believe, I might say: “There is no wisdom, no source of meaning and value in reality. Why, then, should I seek to know? Why struggle on in pursuit of a mirage?” If I did not believe, I also might say: “Our realities are made in the image and likeness of our interests, wants, and desires. Why, then, attend to the evidence and arguments proposed by others, unless to know my enemies? If irrational motives persuade more effectively than arguments, why be rational?”

Philosophy already has had a long and in many respects discouraging history. Yet in the light of faith I affirm my hope that our efforts to reason together are not vain. We can find the truth and rejoice in it.

