

## The Influence of Philosophy on the Expressions of the Faith

Leo J. Elders s.v.d.

*Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly 8 (1985/4), pp. 19-22*

The fact that God's message to man has to be expressed in human concepts implies a certain vulnerability of this message. We all know of wrong attitudes of Christians in the field of moral behavior: many Christians of the 16th and 17th centuries thought the Negroes were inferior men and could be used as slaves. Everyone in those days seemed to think so. Christians of the 19th and 20th century thought they could wage war just for nationalistic reasons. They were tragically wrong. Some Christians of the 20th century think they may resort to artificial contraception or to abortion, just because it seems obvious to them. They are wrong again.

Now what happens in the field of morals, also happens in doctrine. St. John Chrysostomus writes that it is proper to heresy to substitute its own ideas for the dogmas of the Church (1 *Cat. bapt.*, 24). This sort of manipulation, dilution or falsification of the faith already took place at the very beginning: the Apostles warn of false preaching. St. Ignatius of Antiochia in all his letters (exc. that to the Romans) speaks of the danger of doctrinal error. A short look at the history of the Church shows that the main heresies are almost always the result of the intrusion of wrong philosophical thinking into the expression of the faith. This is the case with Gnosticism, Arianism, Monophysiticism, Pelagianism etc. Let me explain this by a few examples: in Neoplatonism there are intermediaries between the First Principle and man, as the Intellect and the World Soul. Some Christians used this system to explain the Trinity of Divine Persons. But in doing so they adulterated the true faith which holds that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are sharing the same divine nature and are equal in power. In this way, Arianism was born. Another example is that of Nestorianism as taught by Diodorus of Tarsus and others: according to Aristotelian philosophy human nature is something entire in itself and subsisting. Hence Jesus of Nazareth must be a complete human person. It follows that the Incarnation of God's Son is no more than a loose connection between God and man. Finally I quote the case of Pelagius who was influenced by Stoic philosophy and taught that man must become virtuous by his own efforts.

It is not surprising that the orthodox Christians felt that wrong interpretations of the faith were caused by philosophical thinking. This is what Tertullianus noted when rewrote that Plato, although in good faith, became the supplier of all heresies (*De anima* 23, 5). Hippolytus of Rome writes that the chief Christian heresies are a resuscitation of pagan systems of thought (*Refut. haer.*). This happened not only in the ancient Church. Something similar took place in the Middle Ages.

Abaelardus attributed to the Holy Spirit the properties of the world soul of Plato's *Timaeus*. The history of heresies in the 12th and 13th century is for a great deal dependent on the introduction of Aristotle's works and Arab philosophy (cf. G. Thery, *Autour du decret de 1210, I: David de Dinant*, Paris 1925, p. 109). In his *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, St. Bonaventure asserts that all errors arise from the wrong use of philosophy and from man's evil will. In view of this past history of the Church we may assume that even today certain currents of contemporary thought will affect the way in which some theologians and authors express and explain the faith. In an essay published 25 years ago ("Was ist Häresie?", in *Häresien der*

*Zeit*) Karl Rahner spoke of crypto-heresies: everyone is affected by the bacilli and viruses of his time, even if he does not always get sick. He cannot help taking over some of the ways of thinking and some of the attitudes of his environment. This places us before the question which trends in contemporary philosophy influenced Christianity. Such an influence, if present, can be positive or negative. After the last war so called Personalism developed in France and this movement (which was partly a fruit of Christianity) helped Christians become aware of their duty to promote the human person and his rights. Other examples could be given of such positive influences. But here we shall only deal with negative influences. A first widespread attitude of modern man is subjectivism. Subjectivism is not a particular philosophy, but a more general attitude which is central in existentialism and in good deal of contemporary ethical thought. We may define it as an attitude which attaches more importance to one's own individual position, feelings and views than to objective and general considerations. Subjectivism stresses freedom over and against authority. It stresses personal experience over and against general rules. It considers individual man the center of reference, so that man will interpret reality in such a way that it fits in with his own ideas rather than admit things as they are.

Subjectivism implies a certain rupture between man and the world. In the age of the Renaissance, man began to consider himself in isolation from nature and society. Subjectivism probably was promoted by modern technology inasmuch as it made people more interested in what they can make themselves than in what nature offers them.

Subjectivism is also dependent on philosophical insights: Fichte, Feuerbach stressed the place of the human individual. Merleau-Ponty asserted that there is no Absolute behind human thought. For Sartre each individual must decide in total spontaneous liberty what reality means to him. Modern art also offers some interesting examples of this subjectivism. In the past novelists tried to describe human life in its reality, but the so-called "roman nouveau" (Alain Robbe Guillet and others) say that writing is an adventure of liberty. To them and to some modern painters art is an experiment with their own freedom.

At the level of the faith subjectivism makes people consider their own needs, their own feelings and thinking all important. Objective teachings, such as Christian doctrine, are easily pushed aside as insignificant. Dogmas which are difficult to believe in, are said to be superfluous. In moral life, one's own private convictions become the law. Some even go so far as to say that St. Paul's ethical teaching cannot be applied to our age, because he did not know our situation and our personal problems.

This subjectivism is also the cause of many difficulties at the level of catechesis. In Europe and America quite a number of studies written on this subject suggest that catechesis should not be the teaching of a definite message, but a dialogue with others, in which one listens to their experiences and tries to make them aware of what they are as human beings. Related to this subjectivism are two other fundamental ways of thinking, viz. perspectivism and historical relativism. The philosophical system of Maurice Merleau-Ponty is called perspectivism insofar as this famous French philosopher holds that my knowledge of reality is always dependent upon the condition of my body, my own past experiences, my needs and feelings. The outside world as such in its pure objectivity cannot be known. What we know of things are perspectives which change according to what man is able to notice or chooses to notice on account of his own condition. The world appears in certain perspectives, according to the human subject who is considering it. The reality of the world is replaced by a series of perspectives or phenomena. Man himself is the fundamental reality. Even the absolute

knowledge of the sciences must be replaced by a sort of dialectic between the human subject and the world.

This way of thinking was also propagated by Jean-Paul Sartre, and it seems to have influenced the thought of the Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, but before dealing with the theory of this author we should first mention historical relativism.

The 18th century has often been called the age of ideology of progress and development. Quite suddenly philosophers began to think that there is a continuous progress toward a better world. Hegel's philosophy of dialectical idealism also subscribes to the ideology of progress. In his view the state of thought and philosophy depends on the stage of the general evolution of thought. In so-called historicism this conviction was expressed in a more easily understandable way. Thus Dilthey said that man's thought is dependent on a certain age of history. Just like we cannot get outside our own age, it follows that philosophy and theology as well as the sciences are determined by the spiritual climate of the historical period in which they occur.

Perspectivism and historicism have exercised a great influence upon theology in the past 20 years. Edward Schillebeeckx has become one of the major exponents of this way of thinking. Although he admits that certain basic categories of human thought remain present in successive historical periods, he holds that the vast mass of our concepts and attitudes are time-bound and depend on the period of history in which we live. According to Schillebeeckx the message of Jesus has been expressed in concepts proper to certain groups of Christians of the first or second century, but these formulae are no longer valid for us. We must, in our turn, formulate the core of the message of Jesus in concepts of our own historical period.

Let me give a few examples of how Schillebeeckx applies his theory. What is essential in Jesus and his mission is that he is the eschatological prophet, that is, he brings God's ultimate message of salvation to mankind. His disciples used categories of their environment to express this conviction. For instance, they called Jesus God's Personal Wisdom, or also a Divine Man (*theios aner*), or they used the term *Logos*. The gospels were written with the help of categories of specific groups of Christians. For instance, Jesus' words "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give to God what belongs to God" are already colored by the way of thinking of Jewish Christians in Palestine. These Christians could not start a revolution against the Romans, who just were too powerful. Therefore, they submitted to Roman authority and paid their taxes, and so this community colored the word of Jesus by means of its own experience. We, Christians, of the 20th century, are therefore not bound by this word of the gospel. We do not know precisely what Jesus himself said. Jesus' words are hidden behind the gospel text. We must reformulate in our own way what Jesus' message implied, or, rather, what Jesus means to us.

It is easy to give countless other examples, taken from the works of Schillebeeckx. The Belgian theologian applies his theory to Jesus' resurrection, to the theology of the gospel of John, to the letters of St. Paul, etc. The core of the resurrection of Jesus is the spiritual experience of the apostles that God has forgiven them their unfaithfulness during Jesus' passion and they must continue to preach the message of Jesus. The apostles used categories of their own Jewish environment to express their inner certitude that the cause of Jesus was going on, and that God offers salvation to man. and so they spoke of a bodily resurrection, but this way of speaking need not be historical. The same applies to what Jesus and Paul are saying about the indissolubility of marriage. Marriage is a social fact which takes different forms according to the stages of culture.

In our own culture, marriage has become a partnership in love. When this no longer exists, there simply is no marriage so that indissolubility does not apply to modern marriage. Professor Schillebeeckx then brings his theory in connection with the history of Christian doctrine: in the course of time this doctrine was formulated in the concepts of particular ages. These concepts lose their value, and must be replaced by new ones. This holds true of the dogmas of christology, of the doctrine of redemption, of Mary's virginity, of the Eucharist. and of the Church and ministry. Schillebeeckx likes to speak of a naive Greco-Roman articulation of the faith, which for us is not obligatory. He considers the Church as a movement rather than as an institution. This means that the form which the Church has taken in the course of time is not necessary, but just a possible form, which can be exchanged for a better one. The same is true of the ministry. In the course of time ministry in the Church had different forms. It would be absurd to make one of these obligatory for ever. The only thing which is necessary in the Church is that there are ministers, but all the forms of ministry are contingent. It follows that on this point there is no real divergence between Protestants and Catholics.

I hope that the examples I have given above show which are the consequences of the introduction of perspectivism and historical relativism in theology. Of course, some theologians are more radical than others. The theory is quite widespread, however. For instance, in my own country it has become the dominant theology. We also find popular expressions of it, such as: modern thought is superior to all earlier insights. For this reason, modern thought and science must become the norm of Christian life. Fortunately this relativism is not shared by all. A good number of neopositivist philosophers and scientists are firmly opposed to it. Karl Popper, in his book *The Open Society and its Enemies*, II, 369, calls this relativism the main philosophical error of our time. Like everywhere else, there is a grain of truth in perspectivism and relativism, but the theory is substantially false. The total historicity of truth is untenable.

We must turn to some other leading philosophies. Analytical philosophy as it was worked out by the Wiener Group and taught in Oxford and elsewhere in the Anglo-Saxon world also exercised a profound influence, in the first place on Protestant theology, but also on some Catholic authors. It is a central affirmation of analytical philosophy that our language, our sentences, must have a verifiable meaning. However, in most cases the object of religious assertions cannot be verified at all. For this reason religious language lies outside scientific and rational discourse. At best it may be compared to artistic creation. It expresses feelings and evokes emotions. It may even make Christians act in a certain way, but we do not know to what extent it has to do with reality. In this way, religious language becomes a creation of man and the concept of God is a product of man. This theory leads to a "death of God" theology.

Thus far the influence of analytical philosophy has not been very strong on Catholic theology, because it was not widely accepted in France and Germany. However, there is a widespread attitude which is related to it, viz. the conviction that one should only admit what has a meaning to oneself, what agrees with one's own experience or what one can verify. In this way an empiricist point of view is latent in many publications about the faith.

Connected with analytical philosophy is positivism. For the sake of simplicity let us understand by positivism a system of thought which is so impressed by the world view of modern science that it tends to reduce all philosophical and theological knowledge to scientific. Central in the positivist view is the conviction that whatever happens in the universe is caused by homogeneous causes. It is unscientific to resort to God as the Supreme

Cause. Man belongs to the material universe and is the product of a slow evolution. Only science can give the answer to what man and his destiny are. Whatever lies outside this world of science, does not really matter much. The "homo positivus" that is, man marked by this positivism, sees the world in a horizontal way and sometimes loses his capacity for a deeper understanding. The sciences, indeed, construct systems to grasp the phenomena and to master nature. In this way they promise progress and affluence to man. However, they do not lead to a knowledge of what is essential. Gabriel Marcel once wrote that science and technology seem to remove man from the world of mystery and being, which is at the same time that of the presence of God and of hope.

Positivism goes hand in hand with a certain anti-intellectualism. But we must restrict ourselves to only a few of the dominant trends of thought, and so we must now briefly consider Marxism. As an heir to part of Hegel's legacy Marx holds that man's social condition determines his thinking and his being. For this reason no real education of man is possible when we do not first influence the social conditions in which he has to live. Marx went moreover very far on the road of shutting man up within the society in which he lives, to which he must be subservient. Man is a being who makes himself; any dependence of God is to be rejected. Marxism has profoundly influenced a number of Christians: the result is that they read the gospels in a Marxist understanding of class struggle; Jesus' message only has a temporal dimension. Others think that man depends so much on his environment, that it is impossible to preach the gospel if we first do not change society and introduce social and economic equality. If a normal economic development is unable to bring about such a development, we must resort to revolution, war or even terrorism. This way of thinking appears to have entered liberation theology.

There is another favorite doctrine of Marxism which must be mentioned in this context, viz. that man depends so much on his environment that he is no longer guilty of his shortcomings. Society and the others are to be blamed. Originally this idea was first clearly taught by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, then it came to be present in Germany and began to exercise its influence. In German philosophy theories of ontological guilt are widespread. We find these theories in Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger: moral sin, if admitted, is not important; ontological *alienation* is what matters. Through Nietzsche this way of thinking influenced Freud who worked out his own theory of the origin of guilt feelings (parricide; the separation of the *super-ego* from the *ego*). Let me explain Heidegger's position somewhat more: man is a being which lost its true place (*Unheimlichkeit*). He has been thrown into the world but should return to Being. Man's finitude is the reason why he is guilty. When man admits this 'ontological guilt, he makes himself free. In this way moral sin is absorbed into ontological fault. The so-called "good conscience" is rejected by Heidegger, because it does not see man's miserable condition.

In the Western world there is a very widespread attitude now of criticising society and existing structures. There even is a feeling that the world is rotten. Very seldom people place the responsibility with themselves. They rather tend to blame others. It goes without saying that these ways of thinking make Christian life more difficult, since they expel awareness of one's own moral faults.

We must now turn to a last current of thought which we shall call existentialism (although the attitude which we are going to describe is more widespread than the existentialism of one or another philosopher).

It is a fundamental theory of Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others that God and man are mutually exclusive. If God would exist as an infinite being, there is nothing

left for man. Man would no longer be free. For this reason God cannot exist. In this absolute way Christians do not hold existentialism, but there is nevertheless a widespread feeling that they are autonomous in the field of moral life and must decide themselves what is right or wrong. In other words, Christian ethics should not be based upon the will of God, but on the autonomy of man. Moral obligations, imposed from above, are against man's freedom and are oppressive structures. The desire for autonomy in the field of moral life is often connected with the desire to reach a greater happiness or a higher quality of life. Unfortunately, one often discovers a certain infantilism or easy going eudemonism behind this sort of saying.

The question of autonomy and heteronomy in moral life is an important issue. It does have an historical background. Often it goes together with the rather superficial view that one has to follow one's own conscience. But conscience is then used to denote a sort of personal evaluation, influenced by one's desire, and not an objective judgment of the intellect.

We cannot now discuss it in detail, but we only notice that this type of existentialist subjectivism has a great influence on many Christian authors in Europe and in America. Moral life is perhaps one of the fields where the influence of modern thought makes itself felt most.

The cases we have mentioned are far from exhaustive. I do hope however, they show how Christians are always exposed to the influences of prevailing currents of thought. Now that the Western world has to large extent become secularized, dominant philosophical trends will carry very little of Christian substance, but often be at variance with Christian views. They nevertheless determine the spiritual climate in which Christians live.

If Christians lead a life of prayer and virtue and let themselves be guided by the Word of God and the teaching of the Church, they'll be able to avoid most of the above mentioned ways of thinking, In order, however, to become aware of the dangers which threaten, a philosophical analysis is of the greatest value. In his age, St. Thomas Aquinas considered it his duty to reject those philosophical currents which were contrary to the truth of Christian revelation. The Christian philosopher today should also put his shoulders under this task.