

## **FIDES ET RATIO: THEOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY PLURALISM**

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*[The encyclical Fides et ratio has received much attention since its appearance in 1998. This article examines several of its strengths and weaknesses. One strong point is its significant emphasis on conceptual pluralism, a pluralism affording a wide berth to philosophical and theological speculation. One weakness is the document's failure to respond to the most pressing contemporary philosophical challenge, the historicized hermeneutical approach, to the encyclical's call for a renewed metaphysics. In general, the encyclical encourages pluralism within the boundaries circumscribed by the Church's faith.]*

THE PUBLICATION of the encyclical *Fides et ratio* has met with general but by no means uncritical theological approval.<sup>1</sup> Several questions have been raised about the document: Is it an unabashed defense of an outdated philosophy of being? Does its emphasis on certitude invoke the ghost of

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<sup>1</sup> The encyclical is dated September 14, 1998. The official Latin text may be found in *Acta apostolicae sedis* 91 (1999) 5–88. An English translation may be found in *Origins* 28 (October 22, 1998) 317–47. A partial list of articles on the encyclical includes: the entire issue of *Communio* 26 (Fall, 1999); the entire issue of *Philosophy and Theology* 12, no. 1 (2000); John Galvin, "Fides et Ratio," *The Downside Review* no. 410 (January 2000) 1–16; Peter Phan, "Fides et Ratio and Asian Philosophies," *Science et esprit* 51 (1999) 333–49; André Dartigues, "À propos de la vérité philosophique. En écho à l'encyclique *Fides et Ratio*," *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 101 (Jan.-March, 2000) 15–36. John Webster attacks the encyclical from a Reformed, Barthian position, claiming that the document does not take full account of human sinfulness, in "Fides et Ratio: articles 64–79," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 948 (2000) 68–76. Thomas Weinandy defends the encyclical in "Fides et Ratio: A Response to John Webster," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 951 (2000) 225–35. Alvin Plantinga also claims that the encyclical does not seriously wrestle with the Fall's effects ("Faith and Reason," *Books and Culture* 5 [July/August, 1999] 32–35). A well-wrought reading of *Fides et ratio* from a Jewish perspective is offered by Leon Klenicki, "Se il rabbino commenta l'enciclica," *Studi Cattolici* 44 (October, 2000) 660–72.

Descartes? Is it foundationalist in nature? Are its assertions sufficiently apophatic? Are its intentions premodern? Is it naïve about contemporary thought? Does it sufficiently recognize the debilitating effect of the Fall on human reason? The task of my article is to examine the principal theses, to answer some of the questions raised about it, to raise several of my own and, in so doing, to discuss the wider implications of *Fides et ratio* for fundamental theology and theological thought at large. In particular, I evaluate the letter in the light of its own repeated exhortations for theology to be fully engaged with contemporary philosophical currents and cultural ideas.

Precedents for an encyclical of this type are well known. Envisioning the proper relationship between faith and reason runs the gamut from Tertullian's Athens vs. Jerusalem dichotomy to Aquinas's unbreakable cementing of the two in the *Summa contra gentiles*. Certainly Vatican I's *Dei Filius* (1870), despite its well-known shortcomings, was an important document both for combating rationalism and for offering a potent apophaticism even today not fully exploited by theology. The encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (1907), despite its poor reputation, is a fascinating decree given its determined attempt to diagnose and expose the epistemological roots of Modernism. *Humani generis* (1950) contains significant philosophical sections including a strong *monitum* about pluralism and its dangers. *Mysterium ecclesiae* (1973), issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, offers several important statements germane to theological epistemology, especially with regard to the role of historicity in dogmatic formulations. Finally, the statement of the quasi-magisterial International Theological Commission, "On the Interpretation of Dogmas" (1989), includes a nuanced treatment of history and the hermeneutics of dogmatic statements.

If the *Sitz im Leben* of *Dei Filius* was the struggle with rationalism and fideism, if *Pascendi dominici gregis* was prompted by an alleged Modernism, if *Humani generis* was fearful that Aquinas would be marginalized, and if *Mysterium ecclesiae* and the Theological Commission's statement were inspired by the increasing recognition of history's inexorable twinning with truth, then what is the motive for the present pronouncement? Surely the ascendancy of postmodernity and allied tendencies in contemporary thought is one reason. Another is fear of the deleterious effects of fashioning a theology apart from a consciously held philosophy. Still another reason is the continuing decline of metaphysics, a central theme of the encyclical, as a legitimate philosophical/theological option. As John Paul II notes, there is a "deep-seated distrust of reason which has surfaced" to the point that there is talk of the "end of metaphysics" (no. 55).

According to the encyclical, this "distrust of reason" has forced philoso-

phy to circumscribe its ambitions: “. . . little by little [reason] has lost the capacity to lift its gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being” (no. 5). For contemporary thought has concentrated less on the human capacity to know the truth instead accenting ways in which reason is “limited and conditioned” (no. 5). One might add that present-day philosophy has not just understood reason as conditioned and limited, but also as embedded, contextualized, situated, and paradigm-based along with a host of other descriptions indicating the historical, cultural, and social circumscription of human rationality. For a significant part of contemporary theory, human subjects, as well as human reason, are deeply, if not entirely, shaped by the cultural and linguistic circumstances in which they are embedded.

This legacy of circumscribed reason extends ultimately back to Kant and finds defenders today not only among postmodernists, but also among neo-pragmatists and hermeneutical thinkers of various stripes. Constructivist elements in both the humanities and the philosophy of science have served to intensify the promethean claim that men and women are primarily shapers rather than receivers of meaning.<sup>2</sup> But while Kant kept the transcendental subject as the basis for meaning and truth, the analyses of Heidegger and Wittgenstein have unmasked that subject as itself rooted in a tangled web of historical and linguistic existence. Heidegger and Wittgenstein have in turn given rise to significant postmetaphysical, posttranscendental, postmodern diagnoses such as the decentering, “erasive” thought of Derrida, the *phronēsis*-based rationality of Gadamer and the neo-pragmatic communicative discourse structures of Habermas. For all of these thinkers, the ability of reason to universalize on the basis of a common human nature or unshakeable first principles, the hallmarks of metaphysics, has been severely questioned. Jean Bethke Elshtain has summed up recent currents of thought by asking if the notion of humanity as *imago Dei* has been “consigned to the conceptual scrap heap as so much debris labeled “Western metaphysic,” “Western logocentrism,” “patriarchal hegemony” or a combination of all these?”<sup>3</sup> *Fides et ratio* intends to challenge several of these newer philosophical directions as inappropriate to the Catholic understanding of revelation.

<sup>2</sup> For a masterful exposition of the history of constructivism from its beginnings in medieval nominalism to its intensification in Descartes and Kant, see Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> “Augustine and Diversity” in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture and Four Responses*, ed. James Heft (New York: Oxford University, 1999) 95–103, at 96.

**THE OFFICIUM CONGRUUM OF PHILOSOPHY**

*Fides et ratio* is, in effect, a long treatise on the congruency and symbiotic relationship between philosophy and theology. Theology needs philosophy as a partner in dialogue in order to “confirm the intelligibility and universal truth of its claims” (no. 77). Without philosophy, theology is deprived of rational warrants and ultimately regresses to an unwitting fideism (nos. 55, 77), for as Augustine aptly notes, “If faith does not think, it is nothing” (no. 79, n. 95). The document, then, has little use for the claim that theology is a discourse answerable only to rules that it defines. Of course, theology’s epistemic primacy remains undisputed; however, the discipline’s autonomy does not free it from responding to, at least to a certain extent, the legitimate criteria imposed by philosophical thinking. Indeed, as the encyclical boldly notes, in a statement with profound implications: “The content of Revelation can never debase [*comprimere*] the discoveries and legitimate autonomy of reason” (no. 79).

Just as theology without philosophy is shallow and ineffective, philosophy without the *lumen revelationis* is incomplete and partial, for “revealed truth offers the fullness of light and will therefore illumine the path of philosophical inquiry” (no. 79). Further, Christian revelation is the “absolute truth,” “the “true lodestar of men and women” (no. 15). Because of revelation’s primacy, any particular philosophy must ultimately be congruent with theological teaching. What is needed, the document insists, is a philosophy “*cum Dei verbo congruens*” (no. 79) or “*verbo Dei conveniat*” (no. 81). Only a philosophy that is suitable and commensurate with the word of God can properly mediate the truth that revelation offers. Only such a philosophy is appropriate for fulfilling the *officium congruum* (no. 83).

What kind of philosophy can satisfy this “office” or “function”? What kind of philosophy, according to *Fides et ratio*, is “revelationally appropriate”? The encyclical outlines three essential elements: In the first place, any such philosophy must have a sapiential dimension, that is, it must be a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life. This philosophy, then, cannot rest easy with fragmentation nor can it limit itself to the intensive development of discrete and local areas of thought. It must, instead, have the courage to provide a definitive and unitive framework. Only an overarching, systematic philosophy can resist functional or utilitarian goals and begin to converge on true wisdom. Secondly, a suitable philosophy is one that verifies the “human capacity to know the truth, to come to a knowledge which can reach objective truth by means of the *adaequatio rei et intellectus* to which the Scholastic doctors referred” (no.

82).<sup>4</sup> To what extent this rather specific statement commits philosophy to Thomism or allows for the methodological pluralism trumpeted by the document will be further discussed. What seems certain, however, is that this second criterion demands that any adequate epistemology must be ultimately wedded to some form of realism. Finally, a philosophy consonant with the word of God will have a “*genuinely metaphysical* range, capable . . . of transcending empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate and foundational in its search for truth” (no. 83). Thought can never stop at experience alone; its movement must be from “phenomenon to foundation.” The pope quickly notes, however, that he is not speaking of metaphysics “in the sense of a specific school or particular historical current of thought.” On the contrary, his intention is to affirm the human capacity to know the “transcendent and metaphysical dimension in a way that is true and certain, albeit imperfect and analogical.”<sup>5</sup>

According to the encyclical, these three dimensions are essential if a particular philosophy is to be deemed revelationally appropriate, if it is to be judged capable of performing the *officium congruum* or “stewardship” of adequately mediating the truth of revelation. Unsurprisingly, the type of philosophy here envisioned is one that protects and undergirds allegedly fundamental characteristics of doctrinal teachings. The three essential elements adduced by the document are intended to support doctrine’s universality, continuity, objectivity and perduring identity over the course of time. Such is how the encyclical views the traditional hallmarks of Catholic teaching.<sup>6</sup> A philosophy fulfilling its appropriate office, then, must be able

<sup>4</sup> Vatican II is here adduced as endorsing realism: “Intelligence . . . can with genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable, though in consequence of sin that certitude is partially obscured and weakened” (*Gaudium et spes* no. 15).

<sup>5</sup> The analogical dimension of theological language, while never fully developed, is a theme noted throughout *Fides et ratio*. For example, the encyclical, citing the famous passage from Lateran IV, notes that human language is capable of expressing divine reality in a universal way, “analogically it is true, but no less meaningfully for that” (no. 84). It goes on to add “our vision of the face of God is always fragmentary and impaired by the limits of our understanding” (no. 13). A fine statement of the analogical nature of language and the limits of theological understanding may be found in Karl Rahner, “Experiences of a Catholic Theologian,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 3–15.

<sup>6</sup> It is for this reason that the encyclical repeatedly invokes certain words and themes. Of universality, *Fides et ratio* notes the importance of arguing according to “rigorous rational criteria to guarantee . . . that the results attained are universally valid” (no. 75). The document also speaks of the necessity of neither obscuring nor denying the “universal validity” of the contents of faith (no. 84), and of the “universal and transcendent value of revealed truth” (no. 83). Of continuity and perpetuity, the encyclical says “To every culture Christians bring the unchanging truth

to sustain, for example, the continuity and objectivity of dogmatic claims such as the mystery of the Trinity and the humanity/divinity of Christ.

Given the type of philosophy that *Fides et ratio* envisions as properly supportive of revealed truth, it is not unexpected that metaphysics has a major role to play. For metaphysics buttresses both the overarching framework and the realistic epistemology identified by the encyclical as fundamental linchpins. It also grounds those unique characteristics that the document identifies, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, as authentic hallmarks of Catholic doctrine. It comes as no surprise, then, when *Fides et ratio* claims that an “intimate relationship” exists between faith and metaphysical reasoning (no. 97). Even more forcefully, the encyclical asserts that any philosophy that shuns a metaphysical dimension “would be radically unsuited to the task of mediation in the understanding of Revelation” (no. 83). Only with the help of metaphysics can the *intellectus fidei* give a “coherent [*congruenter*] account of the universal and transcendent power of revealed truth” (no. 83). In fact, the encyclical holds, dogmatic theology is only able to perform its task appropriately when it is able to rely on the contributions of a philosophy of being (no. 97).

It is clearly the case that this very strong emphasis on the enduring significance of philosophies with a universal and metaphysical dimension is the precise opposite of much contemporary thought that seeks to underscore the local and heteromorphous character of truth. The encyclical, on the contrary, asserts that a philosophy that is truly revelationally appropriate must be able to reason from the empirical to the universal; it must, in fact, be able to “transcend the boundaries of space and time” (no. 85). This qualification is essential “lest the prime task of demonstrating the universality of faith’s content be abandoned” (no. 69). It is understandable, then, that Pentecost is adduced as the model for discerning the universal in the particular. The “unchanging truth of God” is brought to men and women of every culture without harming their local identity, without stripping particular cultures of their native riches or imposing alien forms upon them (no. 71).

Given the encyclical’s emphasis on metaphysics, and its attendant concepts of universality and objectivity, one may ask if *Fides et ratio* is simply

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of God [*immutabilem Dei veritatem*]” (no. 71) and notes that “certain and unchangeable doctrine” must be more profoundly understood. Equally important in this regard is the letter’s criticism of historicism whereby “the enduring validity of truth is denied. What was true in one period . . . may not be true in another” (no. 87). Of objectivity, the encyclical inveighs against the nihilistic “denial of all foundations and the negation of all objective truth” (no. 90). In the same section the document notes that, philosophically speaking, “the neglect of being inevitably leads to losing touch with objective truth and therefore with the very ground of human dignity.”

a restatement of Thomism, an updated endorsement of *Aeterni Patris*? It is true that, throughout the document, Aquinas is lauded for his ability to integrate faith and reason, to harmonize nature and grace; nonetheless, Thomas is always contextualized as one possible, although certainly elevated, model for theology (no. 43). He is extolled for his signal dialogue with Arab and Jewish thinkers and noted for defending “the radical newness introduced by Revelation without ever demeaning the venture proper to reason” (no. 78). Does Aquinas’s thought provide a conceptual framework that can perennially articulate the truths of the Catholic faith? The encyclical responds that Thomism remains one system adequately mediating Christian truth; Thomism, however, does not exhaustively fulfill the demands of a revelationally appropriate philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, *Fides et ratio* suggests that while central elements of Aquinas’s *corpus* remain essential, a new conceptual framework is needed that acknowledges and incorporates advances in thought since the Middle Ages. The encyclical calls for a contemporary synthesis that, while taking account of early Christian thinkers, the Scholastics, and modern thought as well, is able to fashion a new relationship between faith and reason (no. 85). In a similar vein, the document claims that philosophy should be able to “propose anew the problem of being—and this in harmony with the demands and insights of the entire philosophical tradition, including philosophy of more recent times, without lapsing into sterile repetition of antiquated formulas” (no. 97). One hardly sees in statements of this sort a return to neo-Scholasticism or to a narrow understanding of the *philosophia perennis*. On the contrary, remarks such as these, while clearly staying within a metaphysical horizon, nonetheless open out onto the wider conceptual pluralism important to theological development. The “suitable office” that philosophy must fulfill, then, is hardly limited to Thomism or to Scholasticism but seeks instead a multiplicity of conceptual systems that are, nonetheless, commensurable with the deposit of faith.<sup>8</sup>

Considering the strong endorsement that *Fides et ratio* gives to philoso-

<sup>7</sup> Of course, the adequacy, but not exhaustiveness, of Thomism was already argued by the *nouvelle théologie* against those holding that Thomism was, in fact, the consummate mediation of the faith. Henri Bouillard, in particular, was at pains to defend the possibility of conceptual pluralism even while defending Thomistic adequacy. Aidan Nichols correctly concludes that the neo-Scholastics of the Forties were “. . . wrong in allowing so little *droit de cité* to the *nouvelle théologie*. It is not the case that, grudgingly, the other theologies [or philosophies] are permitted to exist until Thomism has absorbed their better insights (whereupon, like the Marxist State, they can wither away).” See “Thomism and the *Nouvelle Théologie*,” *The Thomist* 64 (2000) 1–19, at 19.

<sup>8</sup> One recent endorsement of metaphysics as essential for theological reasoning comes from the Anglican theologian, John Milbank, and the movement known as “radical orthodoxy.” Seeking to create a postliberal, postsecular theology, Milbank

phies having a “metaphysical range,” it seems that the Heideggerian call for the “end of metaphysics” and the demise of ontotheology would be seen by the encyclical as inappropriate and untenable.<sup>9</sup> After all, as Merold Westphal recently noted, ontotheology is the position that there is a highest being who is key to the meaning of the whole of being and this is something held by every Christian theology.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Westphal and others agree that Heidegger’s condemnations of “ontotheology” are often concerned with not reducing the God of mystery to a mere *causa sui*, with not remanding God to the level of predicamental and categorical beings.<sup>11</sup> Insofar as this is the proper concern of Heidegger, then the encyclical may be said to be in agreement with him.<sup>12</sup>

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traces the roots of secularism to Duns Scotus, claiming that Scotus’s univocal notion of being created the conditions for an ontology prior to and unconstrained by theology itself. Being was now an abstraction drawn from the twin notions of created and creating being. Once philosophy had arrogated to itself this knowledge of being, theology was reduced to a “regional, ontic, positive science” leading, necessarily, to a reason/revelation dichotomy. See John Milbank, “The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi” in *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999) 24. For Milbank, anti-metaphysical theologies, such as Barth’s, foster a reduction in breadth of the discipline’s scope. “Therefore, while the Barthian claim is that post-Kantian philosophy liberates theology to be theological, the inner truth of his theology is that by allowing legitimacy to a methodologically atheist philosophy, he finishes by construing God on the model, ironically, of man without God” (ibid. 22).

<sup>9</sup> For Heidegger’s thought on “overcoming metaphysics,” see “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 427–49. Also, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1993) 67–90.

<sup>10</sup> Merold Westphal, “Overcoming Onto-theology,” in *God, the Gift and Post-modernism*, ed. John Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1999) 146–69. See also his “Postmodernism and the Gospel: Onto-theology, Metanarratives and Perspectivism,” *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 15 (April, 2000) 6–10.

<sup>11</sup> As Gadamer says of Heidegger: “Not a Christian theologian, he did not feel qualified to speak of God. It was clear to Heidegger that it would be intolerable to speak of God like science speaks about its objects; but what that might mean, to speak of God—this was the question that motivated him and pointed out his way of thinking” (*Heidegger’s Ways* [Albany: State University of New York, 1994] 170, as cited by John Arthos, “Gadamer at the Cumaean Gates,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 74 [Spring, 2000] 247).

<sup>12</sup> Of course, there are certainly elements in *Fides et ratio* with which Heidegger would take serious issue, primarily the encyclical’s failure to wrestle with the incapability of historicity. Early on, Heidegger, in a well-known letter, recognized the conflict between his own notion of metaphysics and that utilized by Catholic thought: “Epistemological insights, extending as far as the theory of historical knowledge, have made the *system* of Catholicism problematic and unacceptable to



One might also legitimately wonder about the relation of *Fides et ratio* to Jean-Luc Marion's severe critique of idoloc ontotheology in *God Without Being*. Marion argues there that the notion of being purveyed by the Scholastic tradition exchanges the iconic representation of God, eminently displayed by the Pseudo-Dionysian trajectory of love and unknowing, for the more objectified, calculative, and idoloc trajectory of *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*. As has been pointed out by several commentators, however, Marion makes a category mistake regarding Aquinas's notion of being, as Barth himself did in his anti-analogy philippics, seeing being as a category encircling both God and creatures and, therefore, as representative of the "idolic imagination."<sup>13</sup> Marion has recently admitted that, indeed, Aquinas escapes the charge of ontotheology, carefully distinguishing the manner in which *esse* subsists on the predicamental and transcendental levels.<sup>14</sup> Insofar as the encyclical follows Aquinas on this point, one must acquit the document of the charge of reificatory, ontotheological thought.

Not only does *Fides et ratio* defend philosophies with a metaphysical horizon, it also worries about the nihilism resulting from the "denial of all foundations" evident in some contemporary thought (no. 90). Given that concerns about foundationalism abound in contemporary philosophical and theological reflection, it is legitimate to ask if the encyclical holds that some kind of foundationalist philosophy is alone revelationally appropriate. Only a brief *tour d'horizon* of the foundationalist debate can be offered, but one that will, perhaps, shed light on the document's concerns.<sup>15</sup>

There are two broadly identifiable uses of the term foundationalism. On the one hand, philosophers and theologians rooted in the empirical-

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me—but not Christianity and metaphysics [the latter, to be sure, in a new sense]" (John Caputo, "Heidegger and Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993) 272. Caputo adds that Aquinas's "metaphysics of *actualitas* is basically at odds with the meditative savoring of the original sense of Being as presencing" (*Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* [New York: Fordham University, 1982] 201). Whether *actualitas* and disclosure need to be at antipodes is a debatable point, but certainly Aquinas's understanding not only of history, but also of nature and creation, clearly separates him from Heidegger.

<sup>13</sup> David Burrell has noted some of Marion's shortcomings in "Reflections on 'Negative Theology' in the Light of a Recent Venture to Speak of 'God Without Being,'" in *Postmodernism and Christian Philosophy*, ed. Roman T. Ciapalo (Mishawaka, Ind.: American Maritain Association, 1997) 58–67. In particular, Burrell notes that Marion reduces Aquinas's understanding of being to Scotus's univocity. At the same time, it should be noted that Marion is properly concerned that sterile formulas can result in an idoloc reification, reducing God to the lifeless *causa sui* of an inappropriate ontotheology.

<sup>14</sup> See Marion, "Saint Thomas d'Aquin et l'onto-théo-logie," *Revue thomiste* 95 (1995) 31–66.

<sup>15</sup> For more on foundationalism, consult Timm Triplett where he identifies over

analytical tradition of philosophy tend to equate foundationalism with the Cartesian view of adherence to a rigorous epistemic standard. So, for example, one author notes: "By foundationalism, I mean here the philosophical view that a belief is justified only if it is itself certain, or is derivable from premises that are certain."<sup>16</sup> Along the same lines, Bruce Marshall describes foundationalism as demanding that "justified beliefs (including Christian ones) must either be tied . . . to self-evident or incorrigible data, or logically grounded in beliefs which are."<sup>17</sup> When criticized theologically, this type of foundationalism is normally scored for giving the impression that some standard *external to theology* is now proposed as the final criterion for truth and certainty. Theology is now called upon to justify itself before the bar of secular foundations (often some form of empiricism or logically derivable proposition) in order to attain validity. Normative epistemic primacy is now accorded to non-theological criteria.<sup>18</sup>

Alvin Plantinga decries precisely this kind of thinking, classical foundationalism he terms it, that holds that "at least in principle, any properly functioning human beings who think together about a disputed question with care and good will, can be expected to come to agreement."<sup>19</sup> For this type of thinker, some propositions are properly basic and clearly accepted by all, while other propositions are not. Those propositions that are not basic must be traceable back, on the basis of evidence, to properly basic statements. As a Christian philosopher, Plantinga is concerned because "the existence of God . . . is not among the propositions that are properly basic; hence a person is rational in accepting theistic belief [according to classical foundationalism] only if he has evidence for it."<sup>20</sup> Plantinga, for a

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15 kinds of foundationalist thought ("Recent Work on Foundationalism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27 [April 1990] 93–116).

<sup>16</sup> Sally Haslanger, "Feminism in Metaphysics: Negotiating the Natural, in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy*, ed. Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000) 107–26, at 112.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000) 50. For a similar definition, see Amos Yong, "What Evangelicals Can Learn from C. S. Peirce," *Christian Scholar's Review* 29 (2000) 563–88.

<sup>18</sup> This was also the concern of Ronald Thiemann in *Revelation and Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985) and George Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). Both authors wish to demonstrate, correctly, that the Word of God need not ultimately justify itself before other epistemic criteria. Their books may sound excessively Barthian to Catholic ears, however, in that they seem to rely on divine agency alone, rather than on the search for proper philosophical warrants as well, in order to undergird logically the truth of Christian doctrine.

<sup>19</sup> *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 333.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 129.

variety of reasons, thinks that classical foundationalism is rooted in an unacceptable evidentialism seeking to marginalize theism as a warranted basic belief. But this kind of foundationalism that allows philosophy to erect non-theological criteria that theology itself must answer to, or that forces theology into an evidentialist Procrustean bed, is hardly the kind of foundationalist thinking defended by the encyclical.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, the term foundationalism is also used in a wider, more general and less restrictive sense. In this usage, any type of *prima philosophia*, whether of the ontological, transcendental, or empirical variety, is regarded as foundationalist in kind. Here, the entire axis of Western thought, whether Aristotelian, Thomistic, Kantian, or Husserlian, is understood as trying to establish some kind of “foundation” for philosophy, not specifically epistemological or Cartesian, to be sure, but nonetheless given to isolating a first principle, a metaphysical or transcendental foundation for thought and reality. Nonfoundationalist critics claim that this type of thinking both calcifies reality and, more seriously, betrays ignorance of the wider cultural and historical horizons displayed by Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Heidegger’s primordial notion of historicity, Wittgenstein’s cultural-linguistic web of experience, Derrida’s destabilization of textual meaning, Gadamer’s *phronēsis*-based rationality and Habermas’s explicitly postmetaphysical, neo-pragmatic communicative theory all serve to deconstruct foundationalist metaphysics and transcendental gnoseologies as legitimate philosophical options. Among contemporary philosophers, Rorty, Bernstein, Vattimo, and Caputo may be adduced as thinkers opposing attempts at universalizing metaphysical and epistemological systems that only serve to “freeze the flux” of historical thought.<sup>22</sup>

While *Fides et ratio* hardly defends foundationalism in the (basic) evi-

<sup>21</sup> Plantinga does think that Aquinas is a classical foundationalist because his natural theology relies on the evidence of the senses as a condition for proper basicity. Consequently, Plantinga avers, Aquinas shares with nontheists like Flew and Russell the position that belief in God is only basic when sufficiently justified and warranted. Joseph Greco argues against Plantinga that Aquinas was not a classical foundationalist in “Foundationalism and the Philosophy of Religion,” in *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Brian Davies (Washington: Georgetown University, 1998) 34–41. For the argument that Aquinas was not a foundationalist of any kind, see Eleonore Stump, “Aquinas on the Foundations of Knowledge,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary vol. 17 (1992). *Fides et ratio*, following Vatican I, affirms the natural knowability of God (nos. 8, 53). Whether this is necessarily reducible to the type of evidentialist foundationalism that Plantinga decries is another question, especially given the various interpretations of both Aquinas’s arguments and the statements of Vatican I itself.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Rorty has defended this position in many works since the publication of his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1979). Richard Bernstein has similarly done so, characterizing the tradition as saturated with “ontological anxiety,” in his *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia:

dentialist sense, or in the sense that epistemic primacy is accorded to some criterion other than revelation itself, it does defend, precisely within the parameters of revelation, the importance of philosophical warrants for the truth of the Christian faith. As such, the encyclical holds that the Catholic view of revelation requires a certain metaphysical structure or range to support logically doctrinal teaching, as well as the traditional hallmarks associated with this teaching such as its universality and historical identity. Only a philosophy with some kind of metaphysical horizon is able to fulfill the *officium congruum*, to be revelationally appropriate, to provide suitably logical warrants for the *depositum fidei*. Failing to seek such warrants will lead in the direction of either a deconstructive historicism or an assertive fideism both rejected by the encyclical. One may say, then, that the kind of “foundationalism” defended by *Fides et ratio* is quite specific and always elaborated within the house of faith. Attempts to establish a *prima philosophia* are demanded by revelation, never done apart from it, and are ultimately subject to theological criteria. The type of foundationalism sanctioned by the document, then, should always be understood as the “second moment” within the *auditus fidei, intellectus fidei* synthesis.

Even if the encyclical endorses some kind of metaphysics and some kind of foundationalism, it is equally clear that it emphasizes the importance of contemporary philosophy, rejects univocal answers, and seeks new and creative syntheses to express the truth of the Christian faith. How wide is this pluralistic endorsement?

### PHILOSOPHICAL PLURALISM

The pluralism endorsed by *Fides et ratio* is inextricably intertwined with the encyclical’s continual assertion that philosophy is an autonomous discipline (no. 77) with its own methods of which it is “rightly jealous” (no. 13). And, as noted earlier, the document boldly asserts that “the content of revelation can never debase the discoveries and legitimate autonomy of reason” (no. 79). Theology, then, can never simply dictate to philosophy without regard for the authentic demands and claims of reason itself.<sup>23</sup> At

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University of Pennsylvania, 1983). John Caputo has condemned Western philosophy’s search for fundamental *principia* and *archai* in several publications including *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1987); Gianni Vattimo, a well-known Italian exponent of *pensiero debole* (as opposed to the *pensiero forte* of metaphysics), seeks to move beyond the “violence” of traditional metaphysical thought in his *Belief*, tr. Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (Stanford: Stanford University, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> John Paul II made this point in his statement on the Galileo case: “It is a duty for theologians to keep themselves regularly informed of scientific advances in order to examine, if such be necessary, whether or not there are reasons for taking

the same time, the encyclical makes a distinction between the “valid autonomy” of philosophy and its “self-sufficiency.” While the former remains true, the latter is invalid because it refuses the “truth offered by divine Revelation” (no. 75). Truth is one and undivided; consequently, philosophy can never be “separated” or “absolutely independent of the contents of faith” (no. 45). Indeed, “when philosophy heeds the summons of the Gospel’s truth, its autonomy is in no way impaired” (no. 108).<sup>24</sup> Of course, distinguishing the legitimate autonomy of philosophy from a misguided self-sufficiency is no easy task. As such, it calls forth the question: what kind of pluralism respects philosophical autonomy while remaining revelationally appropriate?

Clear indications of the scope and kind of pluralism envisioned are available in a catena of important citations from *Fides et ratio*. The encyclical says, for example, that Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy “but this does not mean at all that other approaches are precluded” (no. 72). Even more strongly the document asserts that “the church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others” (no. 49).<sup>25</sup> The encyclical also claims that “no historical form of philosophy can legitimately claim to embrace the totality of truth” (no. 51). Still again, “I have no wish to direct theologians to particular methods, since that is not the competence of the Magisterium” (no. 64). Finally, “there are many paths which lead to truth . . . [and] any one of these paths may be taken, as long as it leads . . . to the Revelation of Jesus Christ” (no. 38). In fact, the pope notes that the magisterium’s interventions in philosophical questions “. . . are intended, above all, to prompt, promote and encourage philosophical enquiry” (no. 51). The document also proffers a variety of possible models, indicating by example the plurality of philosophical approaches sanctioned by the Church. At different times, one finds cited favorably the expected classical thinkers

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them into account in their reflection or for introducing changes in their teaching” (“Lessons of the Galileo Case,” *Origins* 22 [November 12, 1992] 372). What is indicated for the physical sciences must surely be the case, by extension, for the human sciences as well.

<sup>24</sup> On the earlier debates over the autonomy of philosophy vis-à-vis theology, see John Wippel, “Thomas Aquinas and the Problem of Christian Philosophy,” in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1984) 1–33. On this question with specific reference to *Fides et ratio*, see Avery Dulles, “Can Philosophy be Christian?” *First Things* no. 102 (April 2000) 24–29.

<sup>25</sup> Here, the encyclical, in n. 54, cites “*Humani generis*,” AAS 42 (1950) 566 as a supporting document. But one is hard pressed to read anything quite like the sentence indicated here. The theme of that passage is that although the terminology used in the Schools is capable of further perfection and refinement, it is clearly the case that such philosophy provides a sturdy foundation for church teaching.

such as Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, the Cappadocians, Anselm, and Aquinas, as well as modern theologians and philosophers such as Newman, Rosmini, Soloviev, Florensky, Lossky, and Stein. Even Pascal and Kierkegaard receive favorable mention for their epistemological humility in the face of rationalism. Of course, the thinkers adduced here are representative rather than exhaustive examples of those whose philosophy and theology is in “organic continuity with the great tradition” while developing “an original, new and constructive mode of thinking” (no. 85).<sup>26</sup>

What is clear is that the great Catholic philosophical tradition of the past, as well as the one envisaged for the future by *Fides et ratio*, is hardly identical with Thomism or Scholasticism.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the encyclical leaves no doubt that the pluralism envisioned is one which, like Thomism, is revelationally appropriate and capable of fulfilling the *officium congruum*. This kind of pluralism may be termed “commensurable pluralism.”

Commensurable pluralism allows for a diversity of philosophical systems, frameworks, and perspectives, all of which, however, must be fundamentally commensurable with the *depositum fidei*. Just as Augustine, the Cappadocians, Aquinas, and Bonaventure used varying philosophical approaches while protecting the unity of faith, so this type of unity in multiplicity, similarity in diversity, sameness in otherness, must be present in revelationally appropriate contemporary thought as well. Different conceptual systems will be perennially adequate as possible mediations and expressions of the Christian faith. They will not be, however, given various limiting factors such as human historicity and finitude, exhaustive of either philosophical or theological truth.

Of course, the *nouvelle théologie* had already called into question the conceptual univocity of Scholasticism sanctioned by *Aeterni Patris* and reinforced by the Modernist controversy. Vatican II followed this lead by holding, in several well-known passages, for the possibility of legitimate theological pluralism, a trajectory followed in the postconciliar period as well.<sup>28</sup> Most recently, the 1995 statement of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity regarding differing Eastern Christian and West-

<sup>26</sup> John Galvin, in the article cited in n. 1 has identified many others who, as John Paul II has elsewhere noted, have enriched the Church with their thought. See Galvin, “Fides et Ratio,” 16, n. 18. The variety of names invoked by the pope indicates the wide berth afforded to theological and philosophical pluralism.

<sup>27</sup> As Peter Henrici wrote: “The two explicit references to Anselm of Canterbury (nos. 14, 42) and the allusions to the many Church Fathers who engaged in philosophy, as well as a series of more recent, and not altogether thomistic, Christian philosophers, can already generally be read as a certain relativising of the monopoly position of Thomism and Scholasticism.” “The One Who Went Unnamed: Maurice Blondel in the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*,” *Communio* 26 (Fall, 1999) 609–21, at 610.

<sup>28</sup> At Vatican II, one finds this opening to theological pluralism in *Gaudet mater ecclesia*, the opening speech of John XXIII. For an exhaustive analysis, see Gi-

ern Christian formulations of the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit and, more dramatically, the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification, testify to the actuality of varying conceptual systems that are themselves, nonetheless, commensurable with the *depositum fidei*.<sup>29</sup>

Among those reasons allowing for commensurable conceptual pluralism is the surintelligibility of being itself. The mystery and ineffability of being necessarily supersedes its various conceptualizations; one conceptual system, one perspective on reality, can hardly exhaust its intelligibility. This is especially the case insofar as concepts themselves represent abstractions, at a certain remove from the intelligibility offered by the existing real. This is hardly to aver that the concept is devoid of cognitive value. It is to say that the intelligibility offered by the concept is ultimately limited in the light of the fuller actualization provided by the dynamic reality of the *actus essendi*.<sup>30</sup>

If the abstracted concept is never a moment of pure presence, without an admixture of absence, if it affords a real but limited dimension of intelligibility, then the Church can never be wedded to one conceptual system as if one alone truly mediates the Christian faith. Varying conceptual systems may be incommensurable among themselves, Augustine's and Aquinas's for example, but equally commensurable with the fundamentals of Christian belief. Each conceptual system is adequate; neither is exhaustive. As the encyclical notes, "Revelation remains charged with mystery" (no. 13). Even more strongly Vatican I stated, the "divine mysteries . . . so excel the

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useppe Alberigo, "Formazione, contenuto e fortuna dell'allocuzione *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*," in *Fede tradizione profezia*, ed. G. Alberigo et al. (Brescia: Paideia, 1984) 187–222. One finds it clearly as well in *Unitatis redintegratio*, nos. 4, 6, and 17; and in *Gaudium et spes*, no. 62. During the postconciliar period, one may cite as supportive of pluralism, by way of a partial list, critical passages of the 1973 declaration, *Mysterium ecclesiae* and the encyclical of 1995, *Ut unum sint*, no. 57.

<sup>29</sup> "The Greek and Latin Traditions regarding the Procession of the Holy Spirit," *Information Service* no. 89 (1995/II-III) 88–92; for the Joint Declaration, see *Origins* 28 (July 16, 1998) 120–27. Along the same lines, the agreements made by Paul VI and John Paul II with the ancient non-Chalcedonian churches provide additional examples. In both cases, the content of Chalcedon was affirmed within different formulations and conceptual frameworks. See Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 144–45. See also his, "Unité ecclésiale et communion ecclésiale dans une perspective catholique," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 75 (2001) 6–22.

<sup>30</sup> One sees this argument made consistently by William Hill, *Knowing the Unknown God* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971), chap. 3 and 4. For the historical background to the discussion, see Gerald McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Seabury, 1977) and *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham, 1989). This issue is also treated in Thomas Guarino, *Revelation and Truth* (Scranton: University of Scranton, 1993) chap. four.

created intellect that, even when they have been communicated by revelation and received by faith, they remain covered by the veil of faith itself and shrouded as it were in darkness.”<sup>31</sup>

One intention of the encyclical, then, is to indicate that various conceptual frameworks may be used to mediate the truth of Christianity. *Fides et ratio* makes this clear when it notes that the term Christian philosophy “in no way intends to suggest that there is an official philosophy of the church, since faith as such is not philosophy” (no. 76). This, taken together with the earlier claim that the Church does not “canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others” (no. 49), indicates that the magisterium sanctions no specific conceptual system, and that several may indeed be *congruens verbo Dei*, commensurable with the deposit of faith. When the encyclical notes that the “Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought” (no. 72), or that “certain basic concepts retain their universal epistemological value and thus retain the truth of the propositions in which they are expressed” (no. 96), this should be understood as meaning that the thought forms drawn from the ancient philosophical world, especially those used in dogmatic definitions, are perennially adequate, even if not exhaustively so, for mediating the faith. It also means that certain elements from Greek philosophy, such as its emphasis on the universality of truth and its fundamental realism, are, in fact, uniquely accordant with Christian belief.

But if it true that the Church has had centuries to judge what is worthy in ancient thought, it is no less true that the task of judging whether contemporary methodologies are commensurable with the *depositum fidei* also takes time. This should alert both theologians and the magisterium to what Thomas Kuhn referred to as the phenomenon of “masking.”<sup>32</sup> The adequacy or inadequacy of new conceptual systems is not always readily apparent. New systems of thought, using unfamiliar concepts or paradigms, take time to develop consistency and to account for all of the data. This should be borne in mind when judging whether a new theology or philosophy is, in fact, commensurable with Catholicism.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Denzinger-Hünemann, no. 3016.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970). Also relevant is an earlier paper by Kuhn that, bearing witness to the function of masking in science, is applicable to theology as well. “The Function of Dogma in Scientific Research” in *Scientific Change*, ed. A. C. Crombie (New York: Basic Books, 1963) 347–69.

<sup>33</sup> Both Kuhn’s comments on “masking” as well as the pope’s statement on Galileo should be appropriately recalled during the process of implementing *Ex corde ecclesiae*. Both authors warn of the danger of precipitously determining the boundaries of truth in the face of new evidence or of new conceptual systems. At the same time, this does not call into question the magisterium’s *ultimate* authority



## EVALUATION

While one can agree with the desire of *Fides et ratio* to encourage revelationally appropriate philosophies, certain blind spots in the encyclical lessen the chances for conceptual pluralism, for the adequate but not exhaustive systems that the document itself encourages. Some of these weaknesses will now be treated, even while recalling the encyclical's pertinent claim that it has not offered a complete picture of contemporary philosophy (no. 91).

In the first place, as previously noted, the encyclical identifies the ability to "know the truth," to "reach objective truth" (no. 82), as essential for any revelationally appropriate thought. It adds that this should be done by means of the "*adaequatio rei et intellectus* to which the Scholastic Doctors referred" (no. 82). Indeed, a defense of some kind of realism seems philosophically and theologically essential to revelation for realism alone allows the Church to defend Christian doctrine as not only symbolic and disclosive but also as ontologically true. Inasmuch as Christianity is concerned with mediating states of affairs, human and divine, some form of philosophical realism, profoundly stamped by the subjective and constructive dimensions intrinsic to knowing and productive of it, and equally stamped by the apophatic nature of theological language, must be adduced. Just as theological language has analogical, apophatic, and doxological dimensions, it has ostensive and "representational" ones as well.<sup>34</sup> The breakdown of realism leads, seemingly, to unfettered constructivism, to conceptual pragmatism, or to a narrative unsure of its precise ontological status. This is why the encyclical insists that theological language and interpretation cannot simply "defer" in the Derridean sense but must ultimately offer us "a statement which is simply true; otherwise there would be no Revelation of God, but only the expression of human notions about God . . ." (no. 84).<sup>35</sup>

However, should realism be as tightly bound to the *adaequatio* as the encyclical presumably requires? This appears both to limit the very pluralism that *Fides et ratio* supports and to contradict the varying thinkers espoused by it. Was Newman representative of a bare *adaequatio*? Was

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to determine whether new theological systems are, in fact, congruent with the Christian faith.

<sup>34</sup> Needless to add, the representationalism proper to knowledge of created realities is essentially different from that proper to theology. The entire understanding of the analogical nature of theological language is built upon this premise.

<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Aquinas's important statement should be invoked: We cannot grasp what God is, but only what he is not and how other things are related to him (*Summa contra gentiles*, I, chap. 30). Even if this classic text, omitted from the encyclical, refers to our inability to know God quidditatively, it reminds us of Thomas's own profound apophaticism and the danger of naïve representationalism.

Lossky, mentioned favorably by the encyclical, who had such deep reservations about Aristotelianism and Western theological “rationalism”? Is it not precisely the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of the *adaequatio* itself that, at least in certain aspects, needs rethinking? Most importantly, in defending realism, should the Christian theologian and philosopher be bound to 13th-century conceptual apparatus? This is hardly in the spirit of developing philosophies that proceed through the Fathers and Scholastics and also take account of modern and contemporary thought (no. 85). Robert Sokolowski, for example, clearly defends a realistic epistemology without resorting to the conceptual categories of another age.<sup>36</sup>

Related to the issue of realism and objectivity is the matter of human subjectivity in knowing truth. The encyclical ignores, for the most part, important dimensions of the noetic act that, of themselves, do not necessarily frustrate the realism or objectivity *Fides et ratio* wishes to defend. One sees very little, for example, about the turn to the subject, horizon analysis, theory-laden interpretation, the constructive dimension of knowledge or the tacit and intuitive elements of epistemology. This failure to acknowledge the subjective element in knowing counts as a significant omission in a document discussing human rationality and its relationship to faith. Perhaps the encyclical should be credited for bypassing some of the blind alleys found in the epistemology of modernity. One wonders, however, if by ignoring the anthropological dimensions of knowing prominent in modern thought, the encyclical does not ignore modernity itself, thereby militating against its own goal of establishing a new synthesis that takes account of the entire philosophical tradition.<sup>37</sup>

It is legitimate to read Vatican II as the gradual and requisitely cautious

<sup>36</sup> In this defense, Sokolowski employs not the *adaequatio*, but Husserlian themes such as the intentionality of consciousness, registration, the display of affairs in disclosures and the correlation between things and the dative to whom they are manifested. By so doing he takes the anti-Cartesian dimension of phenomenology in a realistic direction (*Introduction to Phenomenology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000]). It may also be asked whether the encyclical would not have been further strengthened, had it noted, as Dupré does, that while correspondence should not be rejected, speaking about truth as “disclosure” serves to protect the truly religious nature of truth while standing at some distance from the subjectivism of modernity. Louis Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 19–40. Also noteworthy, in this context, is Lonergan’s classic essay on the dehellenization of dogma, which is hardly a naïve restatement of the *adaequatio*, but remains, in fact, a sophisticated defense of realism (“The Dehellenization of Dogma,” in *A Second Collection*, ed. William Ryan and Bernard Tyrrell [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974] 11–32, esp. 14–17). The encyclical does, at one point, try to place the truth-question in a wider context (nos. 28–34). Its observations, however, remain here largely at the level of adumbration.

<sup>37</sup> It has been noted that Blondel and Maréchal, two thinkers who knew the tradition well and yet sought to incorporate the “fundamental achievements of

incorporation of certain positive elements of modernity into Catholicism. This is true with regard to the conciliar concern for freedom of conscience as well as for the moderate egalitarianism (rooted in baptism, undoubtedly, but also influenced by modernity) found in the documents. This same modest incorporation may also be found in the conciliar emphasis on theological pluralism. But if Vatican II began the long journey of the Church's careful evaluation of modernity, then this process will be necessarily protracted—as demanded both by the “spoils from Egypt” tradition and by the fact that virtually all thinkers now recognize that modernity itself is a mixed blessing. Perhaps Origen and the Cappadocians can serve here as helpful paradigms. They began the theological assimilation of the intellectual heritage of antiquity, a journey completed only with Aquinas. The Church's long period of philosophical peace, shattered first by the Reformation and then by modernity itself, must now be restructured by gradually absorbing the fruits of these movements into the life of faith. If the magisterium's first response was mere rejection, this is perhaps understandable inasmuch as the Enlightenment was often a reaction against Christianity in a way that was not true for the ancient world. But the process of incorporation has definitively begun and will inevitably continue. The inability of the encyclical to come to grips with serious philosophical issues raised by modernity, such as the role of subjectivity and historicity in knowing, represents an unnecessary hesitation in the Church's attempt to enrich its intellectual and spiritual heritage with all that is true and human.

A second weakness of *Fides et ratio*, in my judgment, is that it tends to ascribe the contemporary distrust of reason to “nihilism” and to a diminished belief in the “human capacity to know the truth” (no. 5). To this

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modern and contemporary thought” (no. 85) were not mentioned by the encyclical. One reason for this may well be the document's relative disinterest in the subjective dimensions of knowing. *Fides et ratio* speaks pejoratively of an “immanentist habit of mind” (no. 15) but the immanentism (no. 91) and phenomenism characteristic of Kant can hardly be predicated of either Blondel or Maréchal. Henrici's claim that the encyclical did not wish to bind thinkers strictly to Blondel (or to anyone else) as *Aeterni Patris* had bound them to Aquinas appears entirely too benign an interpretation (See Henrici, “Maurice Blondel,” 620–21). While Blondel is implicitly endorsed when the document applauds those who produced philosophies “starting with an analysis of immanence” (no. 59), one nonetheless wonders if Garrigou-Lagrange's charge that Blondel understood truth as nothing more than an *adaequatio vitae et mentis* rather than a true correspondence finds a certain resonance in the encyclical. As for Maréchal, one may well take note of Balthasar's claim in 1946: “The methodology carried out by Joseph Maréchal can be adduced as the most perfect example of such a clarifying transposition [spoils from Egypt] in the present age. . . . Kant has never been understood more deeply and thoroughly by a Catholic philosopher—understood and at the same time applied and overcome” (“On the Tasks of Catholic Philosophy in Our Time,” *Communio* 20 [Spring, 1993] 161).

distrust it consistently opposes as an antidote a renewed metaphysics. Here a major problem of the encyclical surfaces. For *Fides et ratio* fails to address the fact that many contemporary thinkers are searching for a third option, beyond nihilism and metaphysics, an option that indeed calls attention to reason's limitations, but without a concomitant rejection of reason's capacities or a turn toward epistemological or metaphysical despair. What is sought is a properly contextualized reason or what may be called an ontologically appropriate understanding of rationality.

With the encyclical, many contemporary philosophers and theologians are seeking to overcome both relativism and anarchic irrationalism. But they wish to do so without metaphysics, without even a renewed metaphysics, which they deem philosophically untenable. These thinkers seek to develop an understanding of human rationality adequately adjusted to the newly presenced horizons of historicity and linguisticity. Recognition of both the proper limits and the proper capabilities of human reason avoids, in their judgment, a flaccid relativism, a cynical nihilism, and an unwarranted foundationalism. When the pope asserts, then, that the human sciences should not "marginalize philosophy" (no. 61) or when he rejects all forms of relativism (no. 80), it is in fact the case that many philosophers and theologians agree with him, without necessarily turning to metaphysics as the only alternative.

These thinkers argue that Heidegger and Wittgenstein have conjointly shown that traditional metaphysical discourse is inappropriate because it rests on a fallacy concerning both the radical nature of historicity as well as the logic and language of culturally constituted communities. Philosophers and theologians, then, must search out new understandings of truth and rationality similar to Gadamer's *phronēsis* and Habermas's "rocking hull" of communicative discourse. It may legitimately be argued that *Fides et ratio*, Gadamer, and Habermas all reject aspects of modernity and aspects of postmodernity. But while the encyclical turns to a renewed metaphysics as the remedy for philosophy's defects, Gadamer, Habermas, and others turn toward a postmetaphysical, posttranscendental, post-Enlightenment philosophy that fully recognizes human immersion in the socially constructed web of history and culture. This kind of practical reasoning is suspicious of universal metaphysical claims, but it is not distrustful of reason itself. With *Fides et ratio*, this type of reasoning seeks to overcome a strong and militant postmodernity, but, in a departure from the encyclical, wishes to add that reason itself is limited by and embedded in language and history and should, therefore, abandon its former, ontologically inappropriate, pretensions.

Of course, the encyclical does note that revelation is "immersed in time and history" (no. 11), but one wonders if the document appropriates this idea other than by way of *obiter dicta*. This is certainly not to say that *Fides*

*et ratio* must concur with those distrustful of metaphysical claims. To do so leads to a very different understanding of revelation than has traditionally been the case. It is to say, however, that it is not nihilism, irrationalism or the postmodern “destructive critique of every certitude” (no. 91) that is, at bottom, the major challenge to metaphysics as the chief philosophical linchpin of Christian dogmatic truth traditionally conceived. The major challenge, rather, is the attempted *via media* between metaphysics and postmodernity, the attempt to limit rationality to practical reason that issues forth in a hermeneutical approach seeking to understand doctrine in a more protean and fluid sense than the tradition heretofore.

The encyclical, then, despite its length and profundity on many issues, misses the sustained reflections on history and culture, as well as the differing notions of truth and rationality, that are presently flourishing and that, in fact, constitute the chief remonstrance to the renewed metaphysics that *Fides et ratio* itself champions. Insofar as the encyclical seeks to engage contemporary currents of thought, it here misses a significant opportunity.

A third weakness of the encyclical may be found in its understanding of the contemporary hermeneutical task. Since Vatican II, the primary way in which Catholicism has officially thought about theological pluralism is through what may be called the form/content or context/content distinction. The intention of this distinction is to allow a fundamental content, the *depositum fidei*, to be expressed through a variety of perspectives and terminologies. This is the distinction invoked by John XXIII in his opening address, *Gaudet mater ecclesia*, and, in different places and in varying ways, by the conciliar documents themselves (*Gaudium et spes* no. 62; *Unitatis redintegratio* nos. 6, 17). After the council, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the declaration *Mysterium ecclesiae* further reinforcing the form/content hermeneutical approach.<sup>38</sup> Soon after Vatican II ended, Congar hailed the distinction between the deposit of faith and way it is expressed, noting that the entire council echoed these few words.<sup>39</sup> More recently, Giuseppe Alberigo has asserted that the context/content distinction is one of the decisive motifs of the council.<sup>40</sup> Of course, one of

<sup>38</sup> “[T]he truths which the Church intends to teach through her dogmatic formulas are distinct from the changeable conceptions of a given age and can be expressed without them” (AAS 65 [1973] 403). Other comments about dogmatic formulas, found in section five of the declaration, are equally pointed.

<sup>39</sup> Yves Congar, *A History of Theology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968) 18–19.

<sup>40</sup> Giuseppe Alberigo, “Facteurs de ‘Laïcité’ au Concile Vatican II,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 74 (2000) 211–25. See also his, “Fedeltà e creatività nella ricezione del concilio Vaticano II: Criteri ermeneutici,” *Cristianesimo nella storia* 21 (2000) 383–402, at 400.

the reasons theologians have welcomed this approach is because it allows for a variety of conceptual systems and frameworks, thereby encouraging a modicum of theological pluralism. The neo-Scholasticism that had been dominant from *Aeterni Patris* until just before the council could now be complemented and, at times, surpassed by other methodologies.

One may legitimately object that the form/content distinction, if too positivistically or mechanistically understood, represents an immobile theory, disallowing true development and ignoring the necessary coinherence between the two elements, a coinherence clearly illustrated from the worlds of literature, art and music.<sup>41</sup> But few would argue that immobility is the fundamental intention of the context/content approach. It is lauded by Congar and Alberigo precisely because it represents a chance for theology to carry through the “legitimate pluralism” endorsed by the council and to develop new concepts and formulations—which will themselves disclose unique theological perspectives—in order to express the Christian faith.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, *Fides et ratio* is very reserved about the form/content distinction. For example, the encyclical unsurprisingly invokes “certain and unchangeable doctrine” (no. 92) and rejects the historicist claim that “what was true in one period . . . may not be true in another” (no. 87). However, this expected emphasis on the identity and perpetuity of doctrine’s truth is not balanced with earlier ecclesial accents on the possible variety of conceptual formulation. The crucial passages regarding pluralism, in *Gaudet mater ecclesia*, *Gaudium et spes*, and *Unitatis redintegratio*, are not cited by *Fides et ratio*.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the encyclical’s sole reference to *Mysterium ecclesiae* cites that part of the declaration defending the claim that the meaning of dogmatic formulas remains constant (no. 96, n. 113), while

<sup>41</sup> Rahner, for example, in two perceptive essays, notes the inadequacies of the form/content distinction if is not approached with subtlety and nuance, particularly with regard to the knotty question of determining the actual “substance” of a particular teaching. (See “Mysterium Ecclesiae,” *Theological Investigations* 17 (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 139–55. Also, “Yesterday’s History of Dogma and Theology for Tomorrow,” in *Theological Investigations* 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 3–34. An untenable positivistic understanding of form/content is also the gravamen of John Thiel’s criticism of this distinction as found in *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 54 (1999) 11, n. 12.

<sup>42</sup> I have elsewhere argued that the context/content hermeneutical approach allows the organic and architectonic development of ecclesial teaching. See “Vincent of Lerins and the Hermeneutical Question,” *Gregorianum* 75 (1994) 491–523.

<sup>43</sup> With regard to John XXIII’s opening allocution, for example, the extract cited by *Fides et ratio* (no. 92) is found just before the overlooked but hermeneutically critical passage: “Est enim aliud ipsum depositum Fidei, seu veritates, quae veneranda doctrina nostra continentur, aliud modus, quo eadem enuntiantur, eodem tamen sensu eademque sententia.”

ignoring the significant passage pertaining to the possible plurality of conceptual expression.<sup>44</sup>

How should these omissions be understood? Is there an intentional brake placed on theological reconceptualization and the legitimate pluralism of expression? This does not seem to be the case inasmuch as the entire document is calling for pluralism, at least within certain limits. Perhaps the failure to cite the relevant conciliar and postconciliar passages is provoked by the encyclical's clear desire to preserve the ancient terminology, a language it is at pains to protect. For example, *Fides et ratio* rejects "disdain for the classical philosophy from which the terms of both the understanding of faith and the actual formulation of dogma have been drawn" (no. 55, citing *Humani generis*). Or perhaps the encyclical has in mind that other sensible warning of *Humani generis* that the Church cannot tie itself to philosophical systems that have flourished for only a short period of time.

But the failure to cite the germane texts endorsing the context/content distinction is a significant omission and likely the result of excessive caution. Does not the very idea of historicity, of cultural plurality, demand new formulations that will, at the same time, protect the fundamental teaching of the Church? Is this not especially necessary as the Church in various parts of the world theologically matures? Does not the form/content distinction also protect the proper creativity of the theologian who, while always conserving the deposit of faith, must contribute to its proper development as well? Does not this distinction allow the theologian to reap the theological fruits of his or her dialogue with contemporary philosophy, anthropology, and the physical and social sciences? Does not the context/content distinction also recognize the ontological productivity of tradition as well as a proper understanding of the "fusion of horizons"? Does it not help solve the question of unity within multiplicity, of identity within the manifold?

One need only look at the Church's own ecumenical praxis to see how the form/content distinction has been employed. The recent Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, as already noted, sees the essential

<sup>44</sup> See above n. 38. *Fides et ratio* does briefly state (no. 95) that a question must be raised concerning the universality of truth and the historical and cultural conditioning of formulas. But instead of then invoking the conciliar distinction between the *depositum fidei* and the conceptual mode of expression, the encyclical immediately turns to the claim of *Humani generis* that it is wrong to depart from the traditional terms and notions (no. 96, n. 112). Perhaps it would have been better to state that the distinction between context and content is sanctioned by the church and to encourage theologians to seek an intelligible language and appropriate methodology for their times, while concomitantly asserting that the tradition provides a theological terminology and conceptual framework of great nuance and sophistication not easily surpassed and often worthy of preservation.

teaching on justification, which is doctrinally preserved for Catholics in the Aristotelian-Thomistic language of causality that dominates the Tridentine decree, as complemented by a Lutheran conceptual model that entirely avoids classical and scholastic frameworks. The same approach is put to use in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity's document (1995), already cited, detailing the various modes, Catholic and Orthodox, of expressing the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit.

While one can understand that *Fides et ratio* takes a reserved approach on the form/content question because of a desire to see the traditional terminology preserved and an illegitimate pluralism avoided, nonetheless, the encyclical's comments on the hermeneutics of dogma remain flawed in that its emphasis on the proper plurality of theological expressions is not as vigorous as that of the council's itself.

### CONCLUSIONS

*Fides et ratio* is an encyclical maintaining the traditional Catholic understanding that revelation is the epistemologically primary discourse, the *norma normans non normata*. No counter or opposing narrative, whether derived from sociology, anthropology, evolutionary psychology, sociobiology, or even philosophy itself, can ultimately rival the determinative truth-claims made by revelation.

The neuralgic question for *Fides et ratio* and for theology itself remains: how is revelation conceived? In the encyclical, God's self-manifestation is understood as an eternal and unchangeable word to humanity. It is a word that has been crystallized in the Church, under the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit, into various dogmatic and doctrinal statements. These assertions, although cast in imperfect human formulations and open to legitimate development, are fundamentally unchangeable. Any revelationally appropriate philosophy, capable of performing the *officium congruum*, must be able to defend the possibility of these universal, continuous, and objective truths. Hence, the encyclical's profound reliance on metaphysics. But what if revelation is differently conceived?

A different understanding of God's self-communication would place far greater weight on the historicity of truth, the perspective of the interpreting subject and human embeddedness in particular socio-cultural-linguistic worlds; in other words, on all of the epistemological dimensions that received scant emphasis in the encyclical. In this view, revelation would be more Heideggerian and epiphanic in kind, moving ultimately within the fundamental horizon of immersed historicity rather than that of perduringly disclosed being. It would be a notion of revelation allowing for a more profound interplay between *lēthē* and *alētheia*, between presence and absence. It would also call into question—or at least significantly reinterpret



in accordance with the strictures of historically situated thought—the traditional hallmarks of Catholic doctrine. Revelation would be seen less as an abiding word crystallized in certain doctrinal statements requiring universality and continuity as essential benchmarks and more as eruptive manifestations of truthfulness unveiled before humanity, distinctly differing from age to age and from culture to culture. Continuity of doctrine would not mean that the same doctrinal meaning could be found in every period. It would mean, rather, that the same text, in this case a doctrinal statement, would be subject to continuous interpretation in various epochs. There would certainly be continuity. But it would be a *formal* continuity provided by history and tradition, a continuity of the interpreting act in every generation rather than a *material* continuity, a continuous preservation of meaning, organically developed, from age to age. A particular interpretation of the “fusion of horizons” and the “ontological productivity of history” would subject the doctrinal tradition to rather clear, and, in its view, ontologically appropriate revision. This protean hermeneutics of dogma would be, obviously, at some remove from the traditional understanding of the enduring quality of Catholic beliefs. Revelation would still require an appropriate philosophy, one that could fulfill the *officium congruum* and be *conveniens verbo Dei*, but this philosophy would now be very different from the “renewed metaphysics” that *Fides et ratio* envisions. Is this different notion of revelation untenable?

The pope makes a very important statement in the encyclical when he says that theology can never “debase [*comprimere*] the discoveries and legitimate autonomy of reason” (no. 79). Should reason, so praised by the encyclical, “compress” itself by subjecting itself to simply one, possibly outdated, notion of revelation? Did not Heidegger reject precisely this “compressed” notion of reason, and ultimately of revelation, when he rejected traditional “Catholic” metaphysics in order to seek a more primordial understanding of being and truth? And were not similar concerns, at least partially, behind Max Scheler’s final rejection of Catholicism?<sup>45</sup> So, when *Fides et ratio* says that it seeks to “emphasize the value of philosophy . . . as well as the limits which philosophy faces when it neglects or rejects the truths of Revelation” (no. 100) is this not a *petitio principii* according to the encyclical’s own norms? Certainly, then, holding that a proper understanding of revelation must itself conform to the legitimate and veridical demands of contemporary philosophy cannot be a priori ruled out of court as if it represents simply a deviant theological option.

On the other hand, to move in this direction, without absolute clarity regarding this direction’s veracity, would be precipitous. For to understand

<sup>45</sup> Scheler’s philosophical reasons are noted in H. Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement* 1 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969) 237–38.

revelation in a manner profoundly indebted to the Heideggerian notion of historicity (along with its various collateral dimensions) would result, rather clearly, in a significant departure from the traditional Catholic understanding of doctrine. It is one thing to use every possible element of theological epistemology: analogy, theological notes, the hierarchy of truths, the incomprehensibility of God, the surintelligibility of being, the apophatic tradition, the development of doctrine, and reversals of the ordinary magisterium to establish the importance of legitimate pluralism and the possibility of methodological and conceptual diversity. It is quite another matter to call into question the idea that revelation is a self-communication of God that endures, essentially the same, but organically developed, in the Church's teachings. If revelation is indeed tied to a perduringly, divinely communicated truth that is, at least in some fundamental sense, continuous and self-identical, then philosophies with a particular metaphysical range, with a particular notion of truth and with a particular hermeneutical correlate, must be adduced as proper warrants. This is certainly neither to demand uniformity nor to diminish legitimate theological pluralism—on the contrary, too many factors, subjectivity and historicity included, inexorably give rise to such plurality. It is to say, however, that theological pluralism itself must move within certain circumscribed boundaries.

There is little doubt that an improved *Fides et ratio* would engage the ideas concerning truth and rationality stemming from a more culturally imbedded notion of humanity. It would accept, at least in a qualified sense, the historical and linguistic challenges to metaphysics issued by Heidegger and Wittgenstein. It would move beyond a purely Scholastic notion of truth and explore other forms of philosophical realism. And it would more clearly affirm, with Vatican II, the distinction between the deposit of faith and the variety of conceptual expressions. But if the encyclical has inadequately faced some of the problems presented by contemporary thought, it has also properly indicated that pluralism itself must move within a certain scope and range ultimately bordered by the Church's faith.