

Etienne Gilson and Fr. Lawrence Dewan O.P.: Christian Philosophy as the Interdisciplinary Pursuit of Wisdom

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Abstract

This paper continues as the second part of my study of the relationship of Fr. Lawrence Dewan OP and Etienne Gilson. My first paper explored their metaphysical differences, while this second paper explores their common commitment to Christian philosophy and to St. Thomas Aquinas' seminal work on the interrelationship of faith and reason as manifest most clearly in the interrelationship of revealed theology and philosophy. This leads us into a closer examination of Gilson's sustained treatment of this topic. However, we must acknowledge that this topic is often susceptible to unproductive philosophical and metaphysical abstraction. In order to avoid this, we depart from the standard method of treatment through an interdisciplinary appeal to the theological, philosophical, and historical implications of the bodily resurrection of Christ.

Keywords

Christian, philosophy, Gilson, resurrection, revealable

1) Introduction: Fr. Lawrence Dewan and Etienne Gilson

In the history of philosophy there are thinkers who have done the heavy lifting in human thought. St. Thomas Aquinas is largely recognized as one such thinker along with Plato, Aristotle, and St. Augustine. Now those of us who are lesser lifters spend much of our time having to move in and around the 'objects' these thinkers have placed before us. And even if we may strenuously question and protest these 'objects' and their placement, there are no short cuts despite what Descartes contended.¹

¹ Rene' Descartes, "Meditation I" of his *Meditation On First Philosophy* (2nd ed., Amsterdam, 1642) in Daniel Kolak, *Lovers of Wisdom* (Toronto:Nelson/Thomson Learning,

Fr. Lawrence Dewan who, like Etienne Gilson, would call himself an apprentice of St. Thomas Aquinas, was for me a heavy lifter or as close as I would get to one living. And to have known him and studied under him for too brief a time was a privilege, honour, and grace. My encounters with Fr. Dewan in class and outside of class were always challenging. He and I shared a love for Etienne Gilson; he as Gilson's student in direct contact with the living teacher, and I as an admirer from afar in space and time, and yet as one who communed deeply with Gilson through his many texts. Fr. Dewan had serious criticisms of Gilson's metaphysics while I always tried to defend Gilson's position.² So in a sense this paper is Part II of this discussion with Fr. Dewan.

In this Part II, I'd like to begin by recounting an occasion where under the influence of good Dominican wine, I had a distinct sense Fr. Dewan and I were on the same side as we looked out from the dinner table together. We were both advocates with Gilson of Christian philosophy. I of course naively would use the term every chance I could, whereas Fr. Dewan used it rarely and with great care being much more aware at the time of the academic risks and dangers involved in its usage. And yet in his latter years it does seem Fr. Dewan was much more likely to argue for what can only be called a Christian philosophy. This is especially so in his paper *Thomas Aquinas, Wisdom, and Human Dignity: Philosophy and Beyond* presented in Houston, Texas: University of St. Thomas, Aquinas Lecture, October 2013. In this paper one finds that Fr. Dewan was moving closer to Gilson's position on Christian philosophy than perhaps is often recognized.³

Close attention to some of Fr. Dewan's last writings sees him emphasizing what I am calling the interdisciplinary nature of Christian philosophy. He like Gilson was drawing special attention to the fact that St. Thomas' primary concern in his most important work, *Summa theologiae*, is wisdom and that this quest for wisdom takes us necessarily beyond the discipline of philosophy because we are also in need of the discipline of Holy Teaching which comes to us through divine revelation, and it is this teaching that is maximally wisdom.

2001) pp. 238-241; see also Christopher Biffle, ed., *René Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy*, (Mayfield Publishing, 2001).

² Hugh Williams, "Lawrence Dewan O.P. and Etienne Gilson: Reflections on Christian Philosophy's Continuing Relevance and Challenges" in *New Blackfriars: A Review*, Vol.98, Issue 1075, pp. 342-352, May 2017.

³ See Fr. Dewan's paper *Thomas Aquinas, Wisdom, and Human Dignity: Philosophy and Beyond* presented in Houston, Texas: University of St. Thomas, Aquinas Lecture, October 2013 and published in John Hittinger and Daniel Wagner, Eds. *Thomas Aquinas: Teacher Of Humanity* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015) pp. 86-98; see especially p. 89. See also Fr. Lawrence Dewan, *Wisdom, Law and Virtue: Essays in Thomistic Ethics* (New York: Fordham Press, 2008) pp. 68-84; see especially p. 69.

St. Thomas as philosopher, following Aristotle, tells us that person is wise who considers the highest cause of things. He furthermore tells us that this cause is God and in knowing of God it is not just what we can know of Him through His creatures, we are also concerned with what is known to Himself alone and what has been communicated to us through revelation. It is this most of all that is wisdom – what God reveals to us about Himself. And this is the Christ, the Wisdom of God; and here lies our best account of Wisdom. Fr. Dewan has stressed especially in his final years that we as Christian intellectuals need to know this doctrine of St. Thomas – that there is this teaching by divine revelation that goes beyond the discipline of philosophy and, if we be Christian philosophers, takes us well on the road towards the study of sacred theology.⁴

For further evidence of this definite trend in Fr. Dewan's thinking, I recall how in 2013 in the Houston airport on our way back home from the University of St. Thomas in Houston conference on *St. Thomas: Teacher of Humanity* we had occasion to stop for tea together where Fr. Dewan spoke excitedly of Gilson's *Christianity and Philosophy* (1939) highly recommending it to me as a text where Gilson "pulls no punches". Initially I had thought that it was with the Reform theologians that Gilson was "pulling no punches" but in fact it was the relevance of what he was saying for Catholic-Christian thinkers at the time that turns out to be most significant for the purposes of this paper.

Gilson in the preface of this text says he discovered in his engagement with Reformed theology with its opposition to what he calls the distorted images of Catholicism (for which Protestantism cannot be blamed) certain tendencies which had earlier eluded him.⁵ These tendencies helped illuminate the fierce and even bitter opposition by many Catholic thinkers to the notion of Christian philosophy he was advancing. It was in this light that this text *Christianity and Philosophy* was being re-offered in its English translation not so much to reopen and enflame the unresolved controversy surrounding the issue of Christian philosophy, which Gilson believed served no useful purpose, but rather to carefully revisit the fundamental question of faith and reason, and especially those abstract conceptions (definitions) of faith and reason that could simplistically render Christian philosophy a contradiction in terms.

Gilson wrote:

"The ultimate aim and purpose of the present book is to discuss certain conceptions of the relations of faith and reason which, were they

⁴ Ibid, p. 89.

⁵ Etienne Gilson, *Christianity and Philosophy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939) pp. vii-viii.

to be accepted, would preclude the very possibility of the notion of Christian philosophy by making it a contradiction in terms. Having tried elsewhere to establish the reality of Christian philosophy as an historically knowable fact, I am attempting to discover, within the essence of Catholic faith, the roots of its theoretical possibility or in other words, to establish that the notion of a Christian philosophy appears as consistent from the point of view of the Catholic truth taken in its entirety, and from no other one.(p. viii)”

So here we have it – Fr. Dewan’s legacy to me concretized in the handing over of this text that crystallizes his debt to Gilson, his inner adherence to Gilson. And this is not found in their respective metaphysics but rather in their respective pedagogies. And this is the pedagogy of *faith and reason*, always following St. Thomas Aquinas in the treatment of *faith and reason’s* distinctness from each other but also firmly recognizing their inseparability for the Christian thinker, . . . indeed, it is on the primacy of revealed theology for Christian intelligence, and on this issue especially, that Fr. Dewan and Etienne Gilson together “pulled no punches”.⁶

2) Etienne Gilson’s Thomism

Now if we turn to Gilson, we find that in much of his life work he had given special attention to this relationship of reason and faith as encountered most powerfully in the creative tensions of the interrelationship of the disciplines of philosophy and theology. Gilson’s own effort to shed light on this issue has been guided by his own apprenticeship under St. Thomas Aquinas. And it is in his text *Thomism: The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (6th ed.) that we have his most comprehensive effort to interpret and expand upon Thomas’ fundamental philosophical insights and reflections arising from his thinking in relation to theology.⁷

This creative tension however, in our view, is vulnerable to both confusion and disorienting abstractions. Our own effort in the remainder of this paper is to render this central concern from Gilson’s lifelong reading of St. Thomas as concrete and relevant as possible. At a minimum, we wish to bring clearly into focus the problem and mystery of reason’s and faith’s interrelationship. And so we will try to give this some degree of concreteness by focusing on the problem and mystery of the resurrection of Christ as the central object

⁶ This point is driven home most powerfully in Gilson’s text *Christianity and Philosophy* in the final essay “The Intelligence In The Service Of Christ”, pp. 103-125.

⁷ This paper involves a close reading and study of Etienne Gilson’s, *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, 6 ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute Of Mediaeval Studies, 2002). See especially his “Introduction: The Nature of Thomistic Philosophy”, pp. 1-37.

of Christian revelation that also can be entertained legitimately by Christian philosophy.

In an effort to set the context for such an effort Gilson comments upon the distinction between *problem* and *mystery* as being highly relevant for any discussion of reason and faith and, we would add, of the resurrection of Christ particularly.⁸ He says the philosopher must pass through problems to reach mystery and yet neither is to be sacrificed for the other.⁹ When philosophy abandons problems to become immersed in mystery, it is no longer philosophy but becomes mystical, even mystifying religion, because problems are the stuff out of which philosophy is made. To think is to know by concepts which necessarily involve us in problems of definition and evidence. Thus we will argue following Gilson that if the resurrection, which will serve as a special type of illustrative case example, can be looked at as a problem at least in some of its aspects as well as a mystery, then it can be treated as an object of rational enquiry.

If philosophy is reason's most general way of examining reality, it can only deal with the reality of the resurrection to the extent that reality or aspects of it can be approached through problems. Clearly the mystery of the resurrection does not only dwell in the world of ordinary historical experience and its problems, and yet to refuse to recognize the problems associated with the resurrection is to renounce philosophizing about it. However, in Gilson's view, there is a real danger at the point where any philosophical enquiry into the problems raised by the mystery of the resurrection and included in it pretends to be sufficient unto itself laying claim to an autonomy it simply does not have. Once a philosopher makes this mistake he or she easily becomes involved with abstractions that can and often do lead to an interminable problem solving inquiry. It is, says Gilson,

⁸ Gilson, Part III, Ch. 7, "The Spirit of Thomism" of his *Thomism*, pp. 423-426.

⁹ We must acknowledge that some contemporary theologians such as Karl Rahner discuss 'mystery' in theology in a new light contrasting it with an earlier concept of 'mystery' seemingly adhered to by Gilson. Rahner believes this earlier concept of mystery is unable to do justice to the mysteries of Christian Revelation. According to this earlier understanding, mystery is a revealed truth that although it cannot be understood in this life it will be understood in Heaven. Rahner's alternative understanding says God is the Infinite Goal of the human mind but also is the Supreme Mystery. For Rahner, there is an unobjective knowledge of God serving as the condition of possibility for every human act of understanding and knowledge, and yet this God can never be understood as God is in himself by any finite mind and so always remains the Holy Mystery even to the blessed in Heaven. The Beatific Vision then consists in the immediate presence of the Infinite Mystery in love and not the clear understanding of it or the complete dispelling of it as Infinite Mystery. See Gerald McCool, ed., *A Rahner Reader* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975) p. 108. Etienne Gilson's own view of mystery, I would tentatively suggest, is perhaps a confused combination of both the earlier notion of mystery and Rahner's revised unobjective knowledge of God as permanent background condition for our understanding in this life and in Heaven.

to become enthralled by and lost among the dialectic of reason and its often rarefied abstractions. The philosopher as a thinking person should not make this mistake or error in an effort to hide or disguise the fact that he or she by means of these abstractions of reason may actually be fleeing in the face of real and disturbing religious mystery that is posed to us by the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ.¹⁰

Philosophers, in Gilson's view, and here I believe he means Christian philosophers, should continue in a renewable and recurring effort to treat every problem as bound up with mystery such as the resurrection, or to treat such a mystery as a problem to be examined with the aide of concepts and evidence rationally considered. And it is here we have Gilson, like Fr. Dewan, suggesting that the philosophy found in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, and in his own apprenticeship of this philosophy, is fundamentally open to this mystery while being prepared to honestly confront the associated problems because the object par excellence of their philosophy is *being* as the act of existence which, again, is the mystery at the very heart of all reality.

Nonetheless, it is an object, we must admit, that is susceptible to a fatal metaphysical and idealist abstraction which Thomism, according to Gilson, avoids because by persisting in asking 'what is *being*?' its enquiry pushes or reaches further into the interior of *being* itself, answering that – it is "that" which has the act of existing. This leads to an ontology that sacrifices nothing of the intelligible rendered under the form of the concept, yet it knows *being* as the real object defined conceptually as *being* is incapable of adequate capture in definition for it is neither abstraction nor thing, nor is it the formal act that makes it 'such and such' a thing.¹¹ *It is instead the act that posits thing as a real existing being by actualizing the very form that makes it intelligible.* This then is a philosophy, says Gilson, that wrestles with the secret energy that causes its object and it finds in its very limitations as a philosophy, the principle of its richness where its enquiry is forever open ended because its end is actually beyond what can be conceptualized. This is truly an existential philosophy, according to Gilson, concerned as it is with existence in its fundamentals, and though unable to grasp it in the

¹⁰ See Tristan Casabianca, "Turin Shroud, Resurrection and Science: One View of the Cathedral" in *New Blackfriars: A Review*, Vol.98, No.1078, November 2017, pp. 709-721. This fascinating article supports my longstanding and somewhat controversial view of the importance of Christian philosophy. It gives new life to the argument of this paper by subtly yet effectively challenging what up till recently has been the conventional academic and scholarly wisdom, that neither science nor history as a matter of principle can ever prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the evidence surrounding an object such as the Shroud may in fact show us signs supporting Christian claims regarding the bodily resurrection of Christ.

¹¹ Gilson, *Thomism*, p. 425.

concept, encounters it in what Gilson has called *the act of existential judgment*.¹²

This means St.Thomas' philosophical thought then is first of all based upon our ordinary sensible and common sense experience of real things. It is a science in Aristotle's sense having its own method and is a legitimate enquiry in itself. And yet in St.Thomas' case, according to Gilson, it is contained within St.Thomas' work as a theologian and conducted in view of theology's end and object. However, Gilson also concedes that this claim unfortunately, though naturally, is susceptible to drifting towards a vague and unhelpful use of abstraction. This, again, is why we try to provide some grounding for our own discussion in the concrete mystery and problem of the resurrection of Christ. Gilson believes St.Thomas' profound treatment of faith and reason embodied in this interrelationship between his theology and philosophy is important to keep in mind as one proceeds in the study of St.Thomas so as to avoid a serious misunderstanding of his doctrines. Our own effort to illuminate Gilson's treatment of this relationship of reason and faith is through an interdisciplinary appeal to the theological, philosophical, and historical implications of the resurrection. This is a serious departure from the standard method often employed by Gilson himself, which tends to end up involved in problems of the existence and nature of God which inescapably involve us in the complex problems of natural theology and metaphysics often distancing us irretrievably from those of actual history and revealed theology. For it is revealed theology that presents the greatest challenge for the modern thinker today and this challenge often is avoided or evaded by Catholic thinkers through this intellectual distancing in its sophisticated and multifarious forms.¹³

¹² Some reflection on selected epistemological, ontological, and phenomenological definitions and considerations is clearly in order for the critical reader because there is much confusion today over the meaning of theology and of its relationship to philosophy especially philosophical metaphysics. I would direct the reader to any of the commendable scholastic manual. I personally have found Fr. Gerard Smith's seminal work in scholastic philosophy and theology to be especially helpful, see his *Natural Theology: Metaphysics II* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1957) pp. 1-21.

¹³ The distinction between natural theology which is a part of philosophy as the work of our natural reason, and sacred or revealed theology understood as knowledge of God illumined by the gift of supernatural faith is crucial for our discussion. In his essay "Philosophizing within Faith" (See Etienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1993) pp. 6-13), Gilson provides the inspiration for a more phenomenological effort to explain further and illustrate this difference between faith and revealed theology's approach to the question of God from that of the approach of natural reason and philosophy. Imagine one is 'reading' tracks in freshly fallen snow. One may see snowshoe tracks in the snow and know with certainty one's good friend is hunting. Yet still these tracks are not the cause of one's friend hunting and this way of knowing is different from knowing the actual cause of these tracks in itself in direct encounter, albeit dimly held in memory at present. Nonetheless, this latter knowledge is of an obviously different order

Gilson believed that it is possible to present Thomistic philosophy in the context of St. Thomas' theology without confusing it with or reducing it to Christian faith. He argues that St. Thomas himself does this and so Gilson tries to do it again. However, Gilson's particular insight is that to do this well one needs to be clearly aware of the situation and object of Christian philosophy's knowledge and of its relationship to revealed theology especially. In following St. Thomas, Gilson conceives of this object and its knowledge under the elusive term "*revealable*" and it is this knowledge of the "*revealable*" with which his text *Thomism* is most concerned and is especially to be distinguished from the "*revealed*" as strictly understood. Revealed theology in the Christian tradition is properly understood as the teaching of God's revelation. In classical terms, its content is God's word addressed to the human being and its foundation is faith in the truth of this word. Its formal unity depends upon there being a revelation received in faith.

In our own illustration, what constitutes an essential part of the mysterious truth of Christ's resurrection as *revealed* is not the fact that it has been *revealed* but rather that it has to be *revealed* in order for us to know it. However, God in the resurrection of Christ reveals knowledge that as well as being a matter of faith also can be entertained historically and philosophically. It then also must be accessible to our natural reason as what Gilson calls *revealable* and as such is distinguishable from the *revealed* because in its essence the *revealed* is only knowable by revelation whereas that which is *revealable* though being part of that which is *revealed* is also knowable by natural reason.

than that of the natural discovery of tracks and the identification of a hunter through natural reason. Even more important, however, is that this is my good friend whom the present exercise of natural reason has no knowledge of in his singularity and of the singularity of the relationship, for its conclusions only reveal the existence of a hunter but not that of the singular one who has become my friend and who is the author of these tracks at hand. This more phenomenological example perhaps can give some sense of Gilson's intention in following St. Thomas whom he cites as saying - "*We must accept by faith not only what is above reason but also what can be known by reason*" (ST 2-2.2.4). The hunter known by our natural reason in this illustration is the object of a type of natural science - which we might call the science or craft of tracking. The person known in friendship, however, is intimately related to one's well-being referred to as one's salvation in the language of faith. The demonstration based upon reasoning about tracks as signs can neither reach nor even conceive of this latter knowledge which we are suggesting is analogous to the relationship of friendship. Those who reason about tracks and hunters can and ought to be befriended but this latter relationship cannot be achieved on one's own effort. As a science of hunting, natural reasoning and philosophy cannot even conceive of the possibility of the befriending and thus of this salvation to which the language of faith refers. We are by this illustrative metaphor and analogy recognizing the absolute transcendence of the friendship of persons and its associated knowledge by the striking fact of the radically different meanings and interpretations of the hunter for the knowledge of philosophy and for the knowledge involved in revealed theology.

Gilson sets out to clarify the definition of this important but complex notion of the “*revealable*”, and based upon this concept we will argue that this necessarily involves consideration of those historical and philosophical facts of the resurrection event that this notion of the “*revealable*” unifies in some sense. The facts that are unified are those that make up the complex of events known generally as the resurrection or the Easter event. These are facts of the historical and existential orders having as much to do with the open existential judgments of our ordinary powers of perception as they do with theoretical or abstract definitions, and as such we should not delimit *a priori* the evidence that is before us.

3) Attending to the Historical Evidence: N. T. Wright’s Achievement as Biblical Scholar and Historian

In considering the historical evidence we can begin by asking, with N. T. Wright the seemingly simple question of why did Christianity begin and why did it take the form that it did?¹⁴ This inexorably leads to the question of Jesus Christ and of his life, death, and alleged bodily resurrection as the central event. This is, on first impression, an historical question about Jesus and the early church.¹⁵

However, as there have been efforts to keep philosophy and theology separate from one another, there has been a concerted effort to keep history and faith, or history and revealed theology apart from one another. There are philosophical and theological efforts that appeal to divine transcendence in such a way as to attempt an absolute separation of history and faith. These moves seemingly have good intentions, for history and sacred or revealed theology are separate disciplines that should not be reduced to one another nor confused with one another. Nonetheless, in this question of the origins and nature of Christianity — history, philosophy, and revealed theology necessarily intermingle and to refuse to recognize this interrelationship is to take, in itself, a philosophical position that influences one’s theology in no small part because of avoidance of significant aspects of this fundamental and central historical question.

N. T. Wright has shown convincingly how our contemporary thinking has tended to be dominated by two interrelated assumptions – a)

¹⁴ This section follows closely N. T. Wright’s overall argument in his *The Resurrection Of The Son Of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) especially see pp. 3-31.

¹⁵ In order to give the reader, especially the Christian reader, the jarring and even stochastic dimension we believe this historical question had for the early church, we propose consideration be given to the negative or shadow aspect of the question as a type of thought experiment – *what difference would it make to your faith and the faith of the church if Christ’s bones should be found?*

that modern historical-critical scholarship has deconstructed the theological accounts of the first Easter events and so b) anyone taking an historical approach to early Christianity must reduce the resurrection to something lying entirely at the mundane level. Thus one must face the paradox of historical investigation structured to yield *a priori* only sceptical results and so is to be considered dangerous and damaging for genuine faith. Wright's counter position is that history is highly relevant for the question of Christianity and its founding events actually can be investigated without prejudicing the theological account *a priori*.¹⁶

In his dialogue with the philosopher Antony Flew, Wright summarizes his position showing at least implicitly the intimate interrelationship of history, revealed theology, and philosophy.¹⁷ He considers that the existence of the historical Jesus is largely non-controversial among most scholars today. What remain controversial are the theological claims of Christianity regarding Jesus being the incarnate Son of God. Wright argues that this belief in its historical origins greatly depends upon a theology of God and of God's action in the world found in first century Judaism. This is a theological tradition that speaks of God's word, wisdom, glory, law, and spirit, and it is through this theology of God that one is better able to see Jesus making the ways of God concretely manifest in a new and powerful way. With Jesus there was a new sense that God's action in the world was really happening in Jesus' presence, in his very person. So it is this theology of first century Judaism that first of all aides one in attending to the actual historical evidence of this man who stakes his very life on this deep conviction of his call to embody (i.e., to make incarnate) the return of God to Israel.

This insight into Jesus' self-understanding that comes from the early church and its involvement in first century Judaism also comes to a head in the passion and resurrection events that are recorded. It arises only with and through the stochastic shock of these historical events and the radical thought these events help bring about in the participants who live through these events. It is an extraordinary, even a supernatural theological notion or idea illuminated by these events of a particular history, and as well an extraordinary or supernatural

¹⁶ Wright points out that his project of enquiry is carefully resistant to any type of Christian theological apologetic that attempts to colonize authentic historical enquiry, or any program of concerted indifference to history that claims a Christian theological mandate. This latter indifference to history he attributes to the influential Protestant theology of Karl Barth while the former concern is more directed towards Catholic theologies' traditional and scholastic preoccupation with issues of natural theology. See R. Douglas Geivett, "The Epistemology Of Resurrection Belief" in Robert Stewart, Editor, *The Resurrection of Jesus: The Crossan-Wright Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006) pp. 93-105.

¹⁷ Antony Flew, *There Is A God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008) pp. 185-213.

history illuminated by a particularly radical theological insight into the very deeds of God.¹⁸

Philosophy also is very much at work in that our thinking about these events and their meaning involves appreciative, stochastic, and critical thought, in other words a thorough reconsideration and re-evaluation of one's entrenched presuppositions. It is a thinking that occurs within some turbulent interior and exterior disposing context where today, according to Wright's overall assessment, we are most likely to hear the voices of a pervasive and dominating post-enlightenment scepticism. Voices that are saying this hypothesis regarding Jesus' self-understanding and God's deeds in history are either wrong because of the ontological impossibility of any genuine experience of God's deeds among human beings, or because of a delusional self-understanding in this Jesus himself and subsequently among his followers. It is then first from a critical philosophical perspective that this modern bias in our thinking must be humbled and stilled so that we are truly disposed to be open to this question of Christ's resurrection. Wright has summed up those key components of the dominant or standard model he has challenged and overturned – 1) that the Jewish theological context of the time of the resurrection confusedly provides for a variety of meanings of resurrection, 2) that St. Paul did not believe in bodily resurrection but instead held to a more spiritual view of it, 3) that the earliest Christians did not believe in Jesus' bodily resurrection but rather in his glorification, 4) that the resurrection stories are late constructions intended to strengthen second-order belief, 5) that the sightings of Jesus are akin to St. Paul's conversion experience, and 6) that Jesus body was not resuscitated and definitely not raised from the dead as the gospels tell us.

The alternative and compelling interpretation he has developed shows to the contrary 1) a very different view of the Jewish theological context, 2) that there is indeed a fresh reading and understanding of St. Paul and 3) of the early Christians to be had, 4) that this opens up a new reading and interpretation of the gospel stories, 5) that the

¹⁸ Stochastic thinking is my own term and by it I mean being forced to think about God's purpose or aim in the most direct and yet unimaginable way. It is closely related to the term "traumatic" in that it is or can be disruptive of the status quo and of one's psychic equilibrium but yet it does not necessarily always involve the damage, especially psychic damage associated with trauma, for in the case of the early church these interventions of God were radically enlivening. At its most spare, a summing up interpretation is that God, through these events, is helping the early church to see who Jesus is, and Jesus is helping the early church to see who God is. Our argument is that our efforts to understand this necessarily involves the dynamic and integral interplay of history, philosophy, and theology, what Etienne Gilson has persisted in calling Christian philosophy. See Oscar Cullman and Josef Jungmann in Mary Boys, *Biblical Interpretation In Religious Education* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1980) pp. 34-49, 76-88 on salvation history.

best account for Christianity's beginning and structure is that Jesus' tomb was actually empty and people really did encounter Jesus alive in the body again and 6) though a stochastic challenge to the standard theological model and worldview, that the best historical explanation for all the evidence is that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead just as the early church proclaimed and taught.

4) Gilson's Christian Philosophy of the *Revealable*

Just as N.T.Wright shows how the resurrection of Jesus Christ is an historical problem that borders upon and shades into theological mystery, Etienne Gilson shows that it can also be considered a philosophical problem that also borders upon and shades into this same theological mystery. It is under Gilson's concept of the *revealable*, drawn from his reading of St. Thomas, that the early Church's existential judgments about the resurrection's historical data are unified gradually and progressively and that yield to philosophical analysis and reflection.

The resurrection as a complex event has to do with what has been revealed as mystery beyond the reach of our natural reason but it also includes historical events as part of this complex act which has as its end to make our salvation or ultimate well being possible.

This passage above again confronts us with this question of "salvation" which is always interconnected with what has been called "the problem of evil and its solution".¹⁹ In Gilson's text, unfortunately, there is little support for understanding this notion of *salvation* to which revelation is closely tied, that would have any obvious relevance for most contemporary readers. This is not so much a problem of doctrine as it is one of the need for an updated communication and pedagogy and this is of vital importance in relation to the issue of a revitalized evangelization for the Church. It is more recent Thomists such as Bernard Lonergan who have given this relationship between revelation, salvation, and evil an important updated presentation in terms of a seemingly inevitable decline in human development and the accompanying suffering of individuals and whole peoples, and of its causes in a growing social surd based upon mistaken beliefs and mistaken believers who end up opposing truth and goodness in their decisions and actions both unwittingly and wittingly. However, even in Lonergan's updated presentation of 'the problem of evil' there remains a tendency to become drawn off intellectually into the issues

¹⁹ See Bernard Lonergan, "The Problem of Evil and Its Solution" in *The Lonergan Reader*, Mark Morelli and Elizabeth Morelli, eds., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) pp. 308-339.

of natural theology and philosophy and away from revelation, sacred theology and history.

Natural theology gives us some needed basis to argue that the world is not the product of powerful and blind forces but rather of unrestricted power, intelligence and goodness which is known by Christians as the Creator God. This God then is said to know of the human situation and of our great suffering and anguished longing, and can remedy this situation, and wills to do so. Thus evil is not the whole story for if there is this good God then there is not only the problem of evil but there is its solution. Belief in God is then a help as is overcoming the obstacles to this belief. Furthermore, our moral impotence is not the whole story either, for as a potency to a solution the problem of evil can be understood as a good. Thus the problem of evil and its solution are interrelated from the perspective of the intelligence and goodness of God. And yet this argument and approach hinges on the “if” of this good God’s existence, the central issue of natural theology and one of ongoing and seemingly interminable philosophical discussion and debate. This can become a problem for Christian philosophy and one that the counter-positions of various forms of scepticism have fed upon when and if in a strictly linear fashion one holds to the view that this philosophical issue of God’s existence must be finally settled before one can attend validly and effectively to the other essential parts of this interdisciplinary field – i.e., history and sacred theology.²⁰

Gilson is very familiar with this territory of natural theology but he often speaks of the crucial importance of being concrete in such matters. Thus if we speak concretely of a theology of the resurrection of Christ, we again are speaking of the most central event of Christian history understood to be revealed for our salvation. Nonetheless, this salvation is something we cannot reach unless we know it in some manner. Such an end, says Gilson, is ultimately God, the Divine One, who is infinitely beyond the reach of our natural knowledge. To then attain this salvation, God has to reveal to us knowledge beyond the limits of our natural reason and he has done this concretely and historically in the resurrection of Christ. This is a knowledge that is also called sacred teaching or sacred theology and our theological work then is to know its contents. However, this revelation also contains as well all the understanding of the resurrection that our natural reason can provide us. Thus resurrection as revelation only exists in us as the simple faithful to the extent we know it and this knowledge comes to us, in the Catholic tradition as Gilson tells it, in a hierarchically mediated way from God, apostles, prophets, and

²⁰ For a sustained treatment of the relationship of revelation and philosophy see Sandra Messen and Thomas Sullivan, *The Agnostic Inquirer: Revelation from a Philosophical Standpoint* (Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

Christian teachers. It is in theology as the word of God developed by the theologian with the aid of natural reason that this mystery of the resurrection as what has been revealed is explained and clarified. This is the account of the resurrection provided in Holy Scripture, as in St. Paul . . . recognized to be the earliest account and theological reflection upon these events and their meaning for us. It is the resurrection of Christ as divine revelation communicating itself in the light of reason examining the content of faith, on the authority of faith, for the purposes of faith.

Gilson suggests the problem of engaging this religious tradition would be relatively simple if the questions of history and philosophy did not arise to greatly complicate it. For example, the resurrection of Christ is a *revealable* truth but the historical account of the Christian testimony is difficult for many today to follow or even countenance. Natural knowledge of this historical type is included in the body of revelation that belongs to what Thomas calls the *revealable* and that has in itself an historical and philosophical aspect but yet it is drawn further towards theology as the science and discipline of the *revealed* because knowledge of it is held to be necessary for salvation.

St. Thomas Aquinas in his treatment of the resurrection of Christ also shows this theology's relationship to evidence considered by our natural reason or by philosophy.²¹ He begins with a theological reflection showing how our faith teaches us that we have been freed by Christ from the effects of sin and the effects of the first man's sin passed on to us as the punishment of death, and to make this clear to us in Himself, Christ chose both to die and to rise. In dying he removed the fault and in rising he freed us from death. The remission of sin is the effect of Christ's death, says St. Thomas, achieved in the sacraments' work in the power of Christ's passion. However, the effect of the resurrection of Christ as the liberation from death we shall achieve at the end of the world when, according to St. Thomas, we all will rise by the power of Christ.

In this discussion St. Thomas also feels it necessary to confront the controversies that inescapably arise around these events and the Church's testimony. He recalls how St. Paul has asked in earnest – "If Christ is preached as rising from the dead, how is it some among you say there is no resurrection from the dead?" St. Paul then says simply and bluntly, "If Christ be not risen our preaching and faith is in vain. (1Cor.15: 12–19)" St. Thomas adds that some have a 'perverse' understanding of the preaching and of the faith and do not believe in any future resurrection of bodies ascribing to the Scriptures' account of the resurrection only a spiritual resurrection in which some arise from the death of sin by grace. To accept a spiritual

²¹ Summa Contra Gentiles, Bk I, Ch.79.

resurrection and deny a bodily one is to be rejected as contrary to the truth of faith for it is the body that will rise as well. St. Thomas says our Lord promises both resurrections, the spiritual resurrection of the soul and also bodily resurrection.

It is important to note that at this point in what is a theological discussion of the resurrection how St. Thomas also alludes to a supporting philosophical argument based upon the evidence of natural reason for this theological doctrine of the resurrection of the body revealed as sacred teaching. This is an argument that shows the souls of human beings to be immortal and that they persist after their decomposition with their bodies. And further, because the human soul is naturally united to the body as the form of the body it is contrary to the nature of the soul to be without the body, and nothing contrary to nature can be lasting and perpetual. And so the soul will not be without the body perpetually. Since the soul persists perpetually, it must once again be united to the body, and it is this that is the resurrection – to rise again bodily. Thus this immortality of our souls philosophically considered and supported seems to also support a future resurrection of bodies. In addition, we naturally tend towards happiness and ultimate happiness is the perfection of the one who is happy. The soul's separation from the body is a type of imperfection because the soul is naturally part of human nature. Thus the human being cannot achieve ultimate happiness unless the soul once again be united to the body. This is especially so since in this life the human being cannot arrive at his ultimate happiness.²²

Gilson sums up what I am characterizing as the interdisciplinary issues in this manner – revelation as in the resurrection of Christ includes the saving knowledge we could not otherwise obtain. There is a general sense in which it means all knowledge that can be revealed as necessary or helpful for the work of salvation. However, discussions on this topic tend to emphasize the distinction between theology and philosophy for the purpose of keeping them separate. St. Thomas emphasizes the concrete notion of revelation as including all truth leading to salvation and yet as applying to both natural and supernatural knowledge. Theology as an exposition and clarification of revelation is a sacred science and is faithful to its essence when the end pursued is revelation that is possession of knowledge leading one towards salvation. This is the true unity of this sacred science and so even when a theologian such as St. Thomas speaks of philosophy as a philosopher he is still working as a theologian in that he is working for the true end of the human being, our true and complete happiness. Thus the formal unity of theology consists in the fact that it considers everything in relation to revelation, and yet the

²² See SCG Ch. 80, 81 and Summa Theologica Pt. III Q.53 Art.4.

revealable of which St. Thomas speaks as a Christian philosopher can legitimately be regarded as a strictly philosophical knowledge though ultimately subordinate to this theological order of salvation.²³

St. Thomas' concern, according to Gilson, was to explain how the revelation of the resurrection of Christ was to remain unified even though it speaks of natural knowledge such as verifiable history and geography, and he intends to do so without destroying the unity of revelation. All this natural knowledge belongs to a *revealable* knowledge that does not transcend our powers of natural reason. It did not have to be *revealed* to be known but could be *revealed* as helpful for the work of human salvation. So if all that enters into the faith that saves enters theology without destroying its unity, Gilson asks - how can any knowledge be excluded from it *a priori*?

Historical knowledge of the resurrection of Christ could and should be excluded if the content of sacred science as theology is strictly defined by the concept of the *revealed* but not if it also is defined by the concept of the *revealable* because this *revealability* is the permanent availability of all knowledge to the work of the theologian. This knowledge is related to the mystery of the knowledge of God and, in this particular instance of the resurrection of Christ, it is no idle dream but is related to the events of an actual history, even our own actual history. And yet it also actually exists in God's mysterious knowledge of Himself and in the knowledge the blessed have of Him. This is the perfectly unified knowledge that the discipline of our sacred theology poorly imitates in its own way by drawing all natural knowledge into relationship with the supernatural mystery of God encountered in revelation. That philosophy can enter this synthesis, St. Thomas expresses and proves very well according to Gilson. Thus it is that philosophy can be related through theology to the knowledge God has of Himself and as such deserves the attention of the Christian teacher and his or her pedagogy. This is the Christian philosophy that Gilson has been concerned with most of his life and which he argues is found in an unsurpassable form in St. Thomas' *Summae*.

5) Conclusion

Philosophical reason then, in Gilson's view following St. Thomas, is ultimately directed to the same end as theology and so reason and faith are really one in this sense of having the same ultimate purpose. It is natural that this knowledge directs the human person towards

²³ See SCG 1-3; ST 1.1.3. Kenneth Schmitz has given an excellent updated example of philosophy at work on this issue in his essay "Purity Of Soul And Immortality" in *The Texture Of Being* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2007) pp. 200-220.

their final end, and that supernatural means such as the revelation of the resurrection provided by God to reach this end work to carry this human nature to perfection which it confusedly desires but which on its own powers it is unable to attain.

At the beginning of the *Summa Theologica*, Question I Articles 6 & 7, St. Thomas reflects upon the important relationship between theological doctrine and wisdom. He tells us how theological doctrine as a teaching treats of God viewed as the highest cause not only as He can be known through creatures and creation as in philosophy but also in so far as He is known to Himself alone and has been revealed to others. And then he says something very important for our entire discussion and for Gilson's lifelong work in, and as an advocate of Christian philosophy and its pedagogy, that we have characterized in this paper as an interdisciplinary study involving theology, philosophy, and history – that this wisdom involves *judgment* in two manners, 1) as *inclination* as under virtue and 2) as *knowledge* as learned in moral science. The first St. Thomas attributes to the *gifts of the Holy Spirit* and the second to the discipline of *theology acquired by study* though, he adds, the principles of these doctrines studied are obtained through revelation.

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