

COMMON PATTERNS OF EASTERN AND WESTERN SCHOLASTICISM

Modern scholarship has fairly succeeded in rescuing the term 'scholasticism' from its pejorative connotations. But it has not yet attempted, it seems to me, to situate the phenomenon of scholasticism in an overall anthropological setting. A comparative study of eastern and western scholasticisms may help us to acquire a better understanding of the nature of scholasticism and ultimately of the nature of man himself.

We have here another instance of the importance of cross-cultural studies. They serve not just to compare phenomena from different cultures, but they contribute efficaciously both to understanding better the respective phenomena (envisioning them from different and possibly complementary perspectives) and to fecundating each other, so that a more comprehensive and mature synthesis may emerge from the encounter. Comparative Philosophy is not to compare philosophies (from where? - a third 'neutral' philosophical platform?) but to study 'philosophical problems' with the aid of more than one philosophical system, well aware, however, that the 'philosophical problems' are already seen under an underlying philosophical assumption.

From this perspective I would like to submit the following three statements:¹

¹ The nature of this paper would require a greater number of footnotes than can be given here. The reader will find, we hope, many other examples

Common Patterns of Eastern and Western Scholasticism

I - There is a *common pattern* throughout human culture, which can in all appropriateness be called scholasticism, so that this term should not be reduced to the 'Mediterranean' school of thought after the Fall of the Roman Empire.

II - Scholasticism is a *cultural invariant* which appears at certain periods in the development of cultures. Periods which may appropriately be called Middle Ages.

III - The analogies in the different scholastic systems of the world are not necessarily due to historical influences, but they betray a common *anthropological structure*.

I - COMMON PATTERNS

1. *Principle of authority* is the first scholastic tenet. There is no scholasticism without the recognition of an *auctor*, 'originator' of authority. "Magister dixit," ἐκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη,² "it is written",³ *sruti-nirdesastavat*,⁴ *itivuttaka*,⁵ "revelation says," etc. are all different expressions of one and the same attitude.⁶ The source of the philosophical or other speculation is not the private, individual opinion, but an authoritative statement.⁷ This does not mean that the authority has to be blindly followed or that it should not be checked.⁸ On the contrary, the sacred book, the revelation,

substantiating our points. The given quotations are only hints. For brevity's sake we have abstained from citing secondary sources—important and revealing as they are.

² "You have heard that it was said." Cf. for instance, *Matth.* V, 21, ff.

³ Cf. the history of the word and the concept "Bible" for instance.

⁴ Cf. Sankara, *Brahma-Sūtra-bhāṣya* I, 2, 2 "Revelation (Scripture) declares."

⁵ "So, it has been said" beginning of many buddhist sayings and title of a canonical book. Cf. the traditional buddhist expression: *avam mayā śrutam ekasmin samaye*: "so, it was heard by me once." Or again *Udāna*, title of one of the texts of the *Sutta Pitaka* from the pāli *Tiṭṭhaka*, meaning declaration, word.

⁶ Cf. the custom to begin sermons with a quotation from Scripture or the recurrent idiom "Ein Meister sagt" as in Meister Eckhart constantly.

⁷ Cf. the *śabda-pramāṇa* in Vedānta and the *auctoritas sacrae scripturae* in christian scholasticism.

⁸ Cf. "Unde sciendum, quod Augustino in his quae sunt de Fide et moribus plus quam philosophis credendum, si dissentiunt. Sed si de medicina loqueretur, plus ego crederem Galeno, vel Hippocrati; et si de naturis rerum loquatur, credo Aristoteli plus vel alii experto in rerum naturis." Albert Mg. *II Sent.* d. 13, c., art. 2.

the inspired source, the sayings of the founder, or in whatever form the authority is recognised, has to be examined, understood, expanded and made intelligible, if such is required, by explaining it.⁹ The role of the individual is here not to create but to unfold and explain.¹⁰ This attitude implies:

2. *A hierarchical structure of the world.* Neither is reality conceived in an atomic, 'democratic' or horizontal manner, nor is man taken to be an individualized human atom with only external links with the rest of his fellow-beings, nor is history a mere succession of events.¹¹ Here the pyramid would be a valid image. It stands for three things: relationship among all existing beings, mediated relationship and ontically graded relationship.¹² Beings are all connected, yet not all with all. Rather each being is related with its immediately inferior and superior order such that each being finds in its superior the reason for being what it is and its inferior the condition of its existence.¹³ This again has as a consequence:

3. *The intrinsic value of tradition.* Truth or any other value is not reached by means of private and individualized tools, but by receiving from and handing over, when possible conveniently modified and improved, the cultural deposit, be it philosophical,

⁹ Cf. "Posita opinione Platonis hic Aristoteles reprobat eam. Ubi notandum est quod plerumque quando reprobat opiniones Platonis, *non reprobat eas quantum ad intentiones Platonis*, sed quantum ad sonum verborum eius. Quod ideo facit, quia Plato habuit malum modum docendi; omnia enim figurate dicit et per symbola docet, intendens aliud per verba quam sonent ipsa verba: sicut quod dicit animam esse circulum." D. Thom, *Comm. in lib. I De Anima*, lect. VIII, nr. 107.

¹⁰ Cf. the following text which could have been written by any scholastic: (if we were also to translate the three underlined words): "Thus, there are various opinions, basing part of them on sound arguments and scriptural texts, part of them on fallacious arguments and scriptural texts misunderstood... For this reason the first *sūtra* proposes, under the designation of an enquiry into *brahman*, a disquisition of the *Vedānta-texts*, to be carried on with the help of conformable arguments and having for its aim the highest beatitude.; Sankara, *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya*, I, 1, 1 (transl. *Sacred Books of the East*).

¹¹ Cf. the Thomistic conception of *ordo* and the vedāntic of *dharmā*.

¹² Cf. a typical example D. Thom. *C. Gentes*, III, 83.

¹³ God, in the theistic systems, would be the only exception. And still it could be argued that the very name of God is not a name *quoad se*, but only *quoad nos*, viz. that God is not God for himself, but only for his creatures.

Common Patterns of Eastern and Western Scholasticism

religious, artistic or of whatever kind.⁴ In point of fact, nobody can start from level zero, which does not exist. We are all immersed in a situation and willy-nilly depend upon it. There is an underlying ontological link connecting the peoples of any tradition.¹⁵

'Progress,' thus, is not achieved by 'regression' into a more radical starting point, but by continuing and deepening the traditional line.¹⁶ The 'zurück zu den Sachen,' the back 'aux sources,' 'starting points' and 'tabula rasa' attitudes are here excluded. Even today the consecrated 'scholar' is not supposed to take the radical attitude of total contestation but rather that of investigating the 'data.'

It is not of our incumbency to evaluate such an attitude. It is sufficient to state it and to describe some of its corollaries:

4. *The commentaries.* The best method to reach truth, to assimilate it, to attain the core of the matter and to express it, whether for artistic creation, for pastoral concern, for proclamation of the truth or for whatever other motif, is the commentary, i.e. the real and true interpretation: of nature, of revelation, of beauty, of a text. Hermeneutics have the highest place. Scholasticism is humble vis-à-vis the original; even typographically the commentaries are marginal.¹⁷

When the scholastic is not of the opinion of the authority he is relying upon, he will not contradict it directly.¹⁸ He will

¹⁴ Cf. the *athāto* of *Yoga Sūtra* I, 1 and of *Brahma-Sūtra*, I, 1; etc., as expression of continuity and subordination.

¹⁵ Cf. the doctrines of *dharmakāya*, *karman*, 'original sin,' 'monogenism,' 'chosen people,' 'church,' 'elected,' 'twice-born,' etc. which all tend to give an ontological cohesion to a human group.

¹⁶ Cf. the well-known statement of Bernard of Chartres as quoted by John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, III, 4: "We are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants; we see more things, and things that are further off, than they did—not because our sight is better, or because we are taller than they were, but because they raise us up and add to our stature by their gigantic height" (PL, 199, 900)-(English translation by E. R. Fairweather).

¹⁷ Or also interlineary as the glossaries or at the bottom of the pages as many *bhāṣya*, *tika*, *vṛtti*, in Indian texts.

¹⁸ Cf. the muslim commentaries on *Sūra*, II, 100: "Whenever we abrogate a verse or consign it to oblivion, we bring one that is better, or as good." In fact, the power to abrogate is a recurrent problem in most scholasticisms. Cf. Ibn Khaldūn making a number of fine distinctions known to all students of the *ḥadīth*.

submit another interpretation, even if to do so he has to do a certain violence to the textual datum.¹⁹ Properly speaking he will not concede that he is twisting the text or belying the source; he will rather say that he is reading it correctly as he is extricating its real meaning which previous commentators had overlooked or which even the text or source itself did not express clearly enough.²⁰ The contexts of a text, he will say, is precisely the truth-contents, which he is now unfolding.²¹

The underlying assumption here is that 'aggiornamento,' 'adaptation,' 'translation,' 'clarification' or hermeneutics is the proper method to follow. Needless to say, the different scholasticisms will have different opinions regarding the nature of the source to be thus interpreted.

5. *Proper terminology.* Commentaries and subcommentaries will serve to create a proper and specific jargon.²² Concepts will be chiseled from all sides and allowed to shine in precise and well-defined directions only. The formal meaning of words will increase in such a way that words will tend to monopolize ideas and vice-versa, ideas will have to be expressed in precisely coined words.²³

This precise use of words is only possible within an almost univocal universe of discourse.²⁴ This makes possible the over-

¹⁹ Another typical example could be said Madhva's reading the famous upanisadic text (*Chândogya Upanisad*, VI, 8, 7, ff.): *sa âtmâ tat tvam asi*, as saying *sa âtmâ atat tvam asi* and thus justifying his point that the human 'thou' is not the brahman 'that.' "Thou art not that" would then be his reading.

²⁰ Cf. the astounding principle: "omnis veritas quae salva litterae circumstantia, potest divinae scripturae aptari, est eius sensus." D. Thom. *De potentia Dei*, q. 4, a. 1.

²¹ The polemics between *pûrvamîmâmsa* and *uttaramîmâmsa* as well as biblical exegetical contentions could provide us with examples *ad nauseam*.

²² Any philosopher, thinker or creative personality tends to coin neologisms, but only if there is a school following them up and refining them does scholastic language appear.

²³ Cf. the word *gratia* as a single instance, which not only came to mean only a very minor meaning of the word: "gracious gift gratuitously bestowed upon," but which went so far as to express so specifically the 'sanctifying grace in the christian economy' that many respectable theologians thought no other religion can have (such a) grace.

²⁴ Cf. the scholastic dictum: 'formalissime semper loquitur dicus Thomas.'

Common Patterns of Eastern and Western Scholasticism

condensed statements, the *sutras*,²⁵ the *mahavakyani*,²⁶ the *sententiae*,²⁷ and also the catechisms and digests and abstracts.²⁸ Summaries of this type are possible only under the assumption that the more expanded material is homogeneous enough as to allow such condensations without losing their fundamental meaning or quintessence.

It is again this character of semantic continuity which explains the constant use of refrains, common phrases and a great amount of formulations of principles which are supposed to be commonly accepted.²⁹

6. *Dialectical methodology*. Along with the creation of an homogeneous world and with a language of its own, all scholasticisms tend to develop a proper methodology, which presents also some common features. Objectivity is the first one.³⁰ The subjective idiosyncracies do not count, the personal perspectives are not interesting. Originality has no special value and it is considered rather as a danger blurring objective truth. The scholastic is the intellectual ascetic. Furthermore, precisely because truth is impersonal and the only thing that matters, the dialectical procedures will be the only acceptable ones. Each scholasticism will thus develop its own rules for the intellectual arena.³¹ Scholasticism is a spirit, but it appears, first of all, as a method.

The famous scholastic *distinctions* find here their theoretical justification, the practical one being the already mentioned Principle of Authority. The place of any new idea has to be found not as a correction (of an absolute error which cannot

²⁵ Cf. the *Brahmasūtra* as a typical example. The word *sūtra* means a string, a thread—which links together the more elaborated and extended treatises.

²⁶ Cf. the four traditional 'Great Sayings' of the Upaniṣads, as the four pillars or dogmas on which the entire upaniṣadic doctrine rests.

²⁷ Cf. the impact of Petrus Lombardus, the Magister Sententiarum in the whole of the European scholasticism.

²⁸ From Justinian's *Digesta* to the *Catechismus Romanus* and the modern scientific *Abstracts* there is an unbroken (though not necessarily straight) line.

²⁹ Cf. vgr. 'operai sequitur esse'; 'Modus praedicandi consequitur modus essendi'; 'to on pollachōs lēgetai'; 'sarvam duḥkham,' 'sarvam idam brahman'; etc.

³⁰ Cf. the saying "Amicus mihi Plato, sed magis amica veritas."

³¹ Cf. all the scholastic 'disputationes,' 'sic et non' *pūrvapakṣas* and *siddhāntas*, etc.

exist) or as a juxtaposition (of reality which cannot be admitted) but as a more subtle distinction of something already known, but which was overlooked in the more compact world-view until then traditionally held.³² The human mind has got to know the real better and better by discovering each time more and more subtle distinctions, when having a *closer* look at reality which is and was already there.³³

7. *Orthodoxy, the highest value.* The identification of man and human life with a certain precise interpretation of them will lead scholasticism to consider that orthodoxy not only entails doctrinal correctness but also a sincere and total commitment, so that heterodoxy will be judged to be more than just an intellectual mistake, a kind of rational miscalculation, but, on the contrary, it will be seen as an existential stepping out of the right path. There is no separation here between orthodoxy and orthopraxy.³⁴

It is within this culturally unified framework where *dogmas* cease to be the well-balanced and thoroughly-discussed opinion of the assembly to become the very symbols of the whole reality. Heresy is then seen, not only as doctrinal mistake, but as existential perversion.³⁵

II - CULTURAL INVARIANT

At a certain moment in the development of a culture three phenomena appear as forming a kind of cultural invariant present in all scholasticisms.

1. *Consciousness of the past.* The life of every culture, like the life of a human being, shows a kairological moment which

³² Cf. the aristotelic-thomistic theory of the human intellect working 'componendo et dividendo.'

³³ Cf. for instance the fact that Vedānta built upon the conviction of the ultimate identity of all things has worked out fifteen different (!) forms of identities as in *Mukti-niścaya-perurai* or *Siva-jñāna-māpāḍiam*.

³⁴ Human cultural history with all its kinds of excommunications offers us examples of such an attitude in each of its pages.

³⁵ It is within this context that many dark pages of history should be understood, though certainly not condoned.

Common Patterns of Eastern and Western Scholasticism

can in all appropriateness be called *middle age*. It is that age in which the subject ceases to grow in a spectacular way and tends to consolidate positions. It is an age which acquires an overall vision of the past by discovering the very distance which separates and unites the subject with the source of that culture.

No culture can subsist in a state of constant unassimilated change or in a state of permanent revolution. It cannot be all the time under the spell of a founder or the impact of a prophet. It needs to settle down. When a culture has reached its middle age (obviously always a relative term) it finds itself in need of systematization and mental organization. When there is enough human experience accumulated, one or more personalities gather those materials, bringing the riches of the past together and triggering a movement of thought, which is seen as embracing the past.³⁶ It is the beginning of scholasticism.

2. *Confidence into the future*. The effort to systematize and thus understand the past works also as a spring-board for the future. Scholasticism is not a time of crisis. Scholasticism thrives precisely because there is a certain homogeneity (or cultural peace) not only in judging the past, but specially in facing the future. The result of a sound growth is self-confidence. There is an air of optimism in all scholasticisms (in spite of appearing naive as seen from the outside): truth can be known and formulated, the different aspects of man and reality studied and brought together, even the lacunae and errors are taken care of and reckoned with. Training and education, i.e. schooling, flourishes: schools and scholars, text-books and educators are recurrent features of all scholastic periods. Formation means to build up and to prepare for the future. It is obvious that all this would be meaningless without a trust in the future, not only of man, but of that particular cultural society.

3. *Intellectual systematization*. A *middle age* cannot see itself directly as such unless it has already ceased to be alive. Yet the very gigantic effort at systematization accelerates the decay of the age. Scholasticism is the articulation of some of the fundamental myths that a certain culture takes for granted. When

³⁶ A 'father of the Church,' a *rsi*, a prophet, ... are not scholastics, but a 'doctor of the Church,' an *acbārāya*, a master, a rabbi, a professor, may be such.

the myth changes and scholasticism adheres to their old concepts, then, it declines and even degeneration may set in. But as long as that particular transmythologization has not taken place scholasticism prospers. It could be said that scholasticism is the systematic explanation of a central myth of which that particular culture is becoming aware. The basic myths of creation, redemption, liberation, God, historical destiny of mankind, man and the like have triggered out corresponding types of scholasticisms.

Scholasticism tries to satisfy the holistic craving of man; it claims to give a synthetic and often systematic world-view, even if recognizing its unexplored fields; it links man with tradition and gives him a sense of continuity, not only with the past but also regarding the future; it provides man with a sense of kinship. After every new prophet a stabilizing period comes. It is the work of the priest with his 'pastoral' concern to offer a complete and coherent intellectual frame of reference for man to move and live within. The *summa* is not a drawer where you find any thinkable gadget; it is supposed to offer a systematic world-view.

The passage from *mythos* to *logos* present in every scholasticism and its claim at systematization makes the problem of the relationship between the different forms of knowledge a basic scholastic problem. In many a tradition this issue is known as the problem of the relationship between faith and reason. Scholasticisms want to provide an all-encompassing framework for a holistic world-view.

There is no need to stress here that such a framework can well provide orientation and directions of expansion, but that it can also stifle and thwart.

III - ANTHROPOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

Scholasticism is a constant cultural factor because it is also an expression of man himself.

Scholastic man, in fact, east and west, ancient and modern, shows certain anthropological traits which explain the universal phenomenon of scholasticism. Scholasticism becomes then an almost necessary step for the consolidation of certain cultural

Common Patterns of Eastern and Western Scholasticism

values, which only in this way can permeate the whole of a concrete human society. Scholastic man is not the whole of man, but it embodies a part of him, which again and again feels the need to come to the foreground. This would be the ultimate reason why it is equally unsatisfactory to condemn all scholasticism as well as to extoll it without recognising that it expresses only part of human nature and of human culture. Though the three types we are going to describe have obvious sociological characteristics we believe they also manifest something of the very nature of man.

1. *The prophet and the priest.* Every culture presents this polarity between the prophet and the priest. It corresponds to human nature itself, at least as far as we know from our historical memory of over half a dozen millenia.

Both are leaders, but in a different way; both are outstanding personalities, but in opposite directions. The prophet breaks through, innovates, reforms, takes the risks of the future. The priest keeps loyalty, consolidates, recovers and has the abyssal profundity of the past. Each prophet elicits his priest, but there would be no prophet if there were no priest to follow him.

Scholasticism is the regime of the priest; it cares for the general welfare, it organizes, it systematizes, it knows that there are levels of understanding and degrees of reality. Each culture calls this double anthropological type by different names, of course.

Scholasticism is a ritualistic period. The rites are performed and felt to be meaningful as rites and not only for their intellectual contents. Institutions are strong and are eventually reformed or modified but not radically challenged. There may be rebellions but not revolutions as long as the scholastic period is alive. The priest may be criticized and even fought, but priesthood remains still unchallenged. Brahmins, clerics (sacred and profane), administrators and establishments may be found unworthy, but the structure is respected. The prophecies are believed to be fulfilled in the scholastic age, but new prophecies are very badly tolerated.

2. *The leader and the people.* No amount of egalitarian propaganda (always advanced by the elite) or of democratic belief

can weaken the fact of the existence of those who make the decisions and those who in the best of cases only help in making them, those who lead and those who are led.

Scholasticism has, paradoxically enough, a popular character; it is a world-view for the people, formulated by the philosophical, cultural or religious leaders of the time with a concern to offer a coherent and even practical view of reality which would permit man to move and act within the prescribed limits. Scholasticism has no room for 'originals.' It has no place for idiosyncracies; it claims universality.

Seen from the outside any scholastic period looks uniform or even mediocre. Scholasticism considers itself healthy and normal. It is the voice of the majority and the leader is only recognised as such because he leads according to an accepted canon, which the leader has not the power to alter but alone to challenge.

3. *The practical and the theoretical.* In every society there are the liturgists, *karma-kandins*, men of action, and the contemplatives, the *jnanavadins*, men of knowledge. There are those who stress the practical side and those who are open to the theoretical aspect of things. Scholasticism is obviously at the side of the latter. There is a certain gnostic flavour in all scholasticism: not only knowledge for its own sake, but also saving knowledge. Scholasticism will tackle the problem and will solve it in different ways, but no matter how the query is answered it is always from the side of the pandits that the very problem is considered. The scholastic man is the theoretically wise. But sometimes wisdom may be folly.

This third character does not contradict but complements and qualifies the second one. It is not a popular movement as some may interpret these words today. It is the popularity of the classics, in all senses of the word.

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If this overcondensed study somewhat describes a real situation, the consequences for our times are far from being negligible. Not only men, but also peoples and cultures are passing their Middle Ages. To understand them properly may be a much better way than to educate, indoctrinate or even help them according to preconceived schemes.