

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCIENCE, RELIGION AND ARISTOTELIAN THEOLOGY TODAY

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1. *The Relationship between Science and Religion*

Many scientists, philosophers and theologians maintain that there exists a relationship of 'consonance' between science and religion today, and that this is not based, as in the past, on the fact that there may be some problems which have as yet not been solved by science and which might have a religious solution. They think that through the methods of contemporary science it is possible to admit, in a probable, if not in a necessary way, the existence of God and the creation of the world by Him. This is the case, for instance, of Richard Swinburne, who thinks that the existence of God, from the point of view of the calculus of probabilities, is the simplest and therefore the most probable hypothesis for the explanation of the world, as it is known by science.¹ In an analogous way, John Polkinghorne thinks that the world's creation by God is compatible with a physical theory of the stationary universe as well as with a scientific conception of its origin, both where this origin is conceived as involving an initial 'big bang' and where it is conceived as involving a quantistic fluctuation of an 'inflated *vacuum*'. Moreover, Polkinghorne believes that the apparently anthropic direction of evolution can also be explained by a scientific theory of an 'informational, not energetic, agency' of God.²

Some of the contents of Christian faith, indeed, cannot be explained from a scientific point of view. Furthermore, they cannot be accepted by

¹ See R. Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

² See J. Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in the Age of Science* (Yale University Press, 1998).

science because they seem to contradict the laws of nature, even where these are conceived in an indeterministic or a probabilistic way. I am thinking, for instance, of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or of the virginity of Mary and her maternity in relation to Christ, which seem to contradict the laws of biology, and also of many other miracles. In these cases it is not enough to appeal to a simple act of faith, because Christian faith, as the Pope said in his last encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, cannot be faith in the absurd, i.e. in the impossible. Even those scientists and theologians mentioned above admit that between science and religion there must be a relationship of consonance, i.e. of compatibility. And the existence of any contradiction would violate this relationship.

In order to eliminate these contradictions, and to ensure the compatibility of science and religion, it is necessary to admit the dependence of nature on an absolute power which can make exceptions to the laws of nature, i.e. the same kind of dependence which is involved in the notion of creation, as stated by the Bible. Now, the concept of creation, considered in the sense of a total dependence of the universe on a transcendent God, even purified of those mythical characters which are described in the Bible, can certainly be accepted by an act of faith, but this presupposes some necessary conditions. And the absence of these conditions makes faith absurd and unacceptable from any point of view.

2. *The Conditions of Consonance*

In my opinion, these conditions are the following:

1. The existence of an absolute, i.e. infinite, power, which does not depend on any other being and on which every other being depends;
2. the transcendence, i.e. the difference, the complete heterogeneity, of a being which possesses such a power in relation to nature, i.e. in relation to the universe, including mankind, with its history, its culture, its science, and its technology;
3. the characteristic of intelligence of this being, which gives him the capacity to think, will, and act.

The first of these conditions, i.e. the existence of an absolute power, is necessary in order to explain the exceptions to the laws of nature because only the power that created these laws can violate or suspend them. But this means that there must be something, or someone, which or who is

superior to nature because it or he is not subject to its laws. This means, therefore, that nature, or the universe, or the infinite multiplicity of worlds – in other words the reality which is the object of our scientific investigations – is not the whole of reality. There must be something else upon which that reality which is the subject of science depends. Obviously, I am not claiming here that this something else does necessarily exist (this is a philosophical problem and would need a wider discussion) but I am saying that its existence is necessary in order to ensure a consonance between science and religion.

The second condition, i.e. the transcendence of a being who possesses absolute power, is necessary because if the power capable of making exceptions to the laws of nature was immanent, i. e. internal, to nature, it would be a part of it, and therefore the same nature would on the one hand be governed by some laws and on the other hand it would be capable of making exceptions to them, and this would be a contradiction. It is true that for some scientists many events in nature, even biological evolution, depend only on chance. But in this case chance would itself be a law of nature, and in this respect the events mentioned above – the resurrection of Christ, the virginity of Mary – would be exceptions and therefore impossible. I do not believe, in fact, that those scientists who believe that natural phenomena are due to chance would admit the possibility, through chance, of miracles. Even if we imagine an immense human power, capable of going beyond the laws of nature that we know so far, this power would be a part of nature and would be subject to its general laws. Thus, even this immense power could not explain the events which are apparently in contrast with the general laws. If it could, it would be a magical power incompatible with science.

The third condition, i.e. the intelligence of a being provided with absolute power, is the most evident, because only an intelligent being capable of thinking and willing can act on nature and on history in an intentional way, in a way which is required to explain the events mentioned above. On the other hand, every kind of religion (at least religions inspired by the Bible) believes in the existence of an intelligent and willing God, but the condition for this belief, which is faith, is the possibility of conceiving of such a being in a rational way, or at least in a way which is not in contrast with reason. All these conditions – and this is my point – are not a question of religion (i.e. of faith in divine revelation, because these conditions are also the conditions for the possibility of revelation itself), or of science, because they go beyond the field of scientific investigation.

Therefore, they are part of a discourse which is neither religion nor science, a discourse which we can refer to by no other name than philosophy, or better, a particular type of philosophy – metaphysics – or better still a particular type of metaphysics, i.e. the metaphysics of transcendence.

3. *Aristotelian Theology*

As a matter of fact, all these conditions were arrived at by a philosopher who did not know the Bible and who was not influenced by it in any sense – Aristotle. He arrived at these conditions through a process which he claimed to be rational, i.e. philosophical. This process may be criticised from a philosophical point of view, or, in contrary fashion, it may be accepted as a valid philosophical demonstration. This is an open question at the level of philosophical discussion. But, whatever the case, this process was historically located within a philosophical context and it was totally uninfluenced by any kind of religious faith. In the view of philosophers who have believed in religions based upon by the Bible – Jews (such as Avicenna and Maimonides), Muslims (such as Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes) and Christians (such as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas) – Aristotle’s formulation of these conditions was a necessary premise to religious faith. A necessary premise from a logical point of view and not from a psychological point of view, although obviously it was not a sufficient premise.

The ‘unmoved mover’ (whether one or more than one), whose existence Aristotle tries to demonstrate in the twelfth book of his *Metaphysics* (i.e. through so-called ‘Aristotelian theology’), has an infinite power because – as Aristotle explicitly affirms – it has the capacity to move the heavens for an infinite time (cp. 1073 a 8-9); it is transcendent in relation to every other being because it is the only unmovable being, whereas all the other beings are moved (1071 b 17-20); and it is intelligent because it thinks (the act of thinking is its self being, it is its self essence) and it wills (as is proved by the fact that, according to Aristotle, it is happy). It also has the capacity to act because – as I have tried to demonstrate in many works – it is not only a final cause but also an efficient cause of the movement of the heavens.³

³ See E. Berti, ‘Da chi è amato il motore immobile? Su Aristotele, *Metaph.* XII 6-7, *Méthexis. Revista Argentina di Filosofia Antigua*, X, 1997, pp. 59-82; ‘De qui est fin le moteur immobile?’, in M. Bastit ed J. Follon (eds.), *Essais sur la théologie d’Aristote* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1998), pp. 5-28; ‘The Unmoved Mover as Efficient Cause in Aristotle’s *Metaph.* XII’, in M. Frede and D. Charles (eds.), *Aristotle’s Metaphysics Lambda* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 181-206.

Therefore, according to Aristotle, 'he' – we can now use the personal pronoun because we are speaking about a person – is a God, and this is a consequence of the fact that he is eternal and happy (these are the characteristics that ancient Greeks attributed to gods), even if he is not a creator God (1072 b 26-30).

Obviously, I am not claiming that Aristotle's unmoved mover is the same as the God of the Bible: as I have already observed, he is not a creator God. For Aristotle he is just a mover, even if by moving the heavens he is the cause of every generation and corruption on the earth, i.e. of the life and death of every living being. And he has not revealed himself to man: Aristotle is not aware of divine revelation. Perhaps – but this is not certain – he does not know or love man. In some passages Aristotle seems to think that God knows and loves only himself, but at other points he affirms that wise men are loved by gods. Therefore Aristotle's God does not have sufficient characteristics to be the same as the God of the Bible. But the characteristics he does have, i.e. transcendence, intelligence, infinite power, are necessary to being the God of the Bible in the sense that they are the necessary conditions for a creator God. From a philosophical point of view, it is important to add that Aristotle's unmoved mover has an advantage that the God of the Bible does not have – i.e. he was not known because of an act of revelation but was discovered by a philosopher through human instruments alone, i.e. observation, reflection, and reasoning.

4. *The Necessity of Metaphysics*

My aim here is not the defence of Aristotelian theology as it was historically developed. Nevertheless, I believe that in order to ensure compatibility between science and religion it is necessary to have a form of metaphysics of the kind to be found in Aristotelian theology – i.e. a form of metaphysics which admits the transcendence of the Absolute. This theology, or rather, this form of metaphysics, is termed 'Aristotelian' perhaps because Aristotle was the only philosopher who was not influenced by the Bible and yet reached the idea of a transcendent God by rational paths. This form of metaphysics does not seek to demonstrate the validity of the contents of religious faith but it does allow us to establish the logical conditions for their possible existence, i.e. to create a sort of space which goes beyond science. Without this space religion would be impossible. In order to believe in religious meaning it is not necessary to profess this form of metaphysics

explicitly, but this kind of metaphysics is necessarily involved, from a logical point of view, in every authentic act of religious faith.

This is a very poor form of metaphysics because it does not include the whole of 'natural theology' as developed by Christian (but also by Jewish and Muslim) philosophers during the Middle Ages (but also during the modern age). This kind of metaphysics could be defined 'weak' metaphysics from an epistemological point of view, i.e. in the same sense in which scientific theories with a poor cognitive content are called 'weak theories'. The fundamental idea of this form of metaphysics, in fact, is based on the idea that the world of our experience, which forms the object of our scientific investigations, does not coincide with the whole of reality. For this reason, the world of the experience is not an absolute world, it is not self-sufficient, and it does not have within itself everything that is necessary for its explanation. We would say that this metaphysics only creates a space. But, precisely in virtue of its weakness, this form of metaphysics is very strong from a logical point of view because it is extremely difficult to refute it. In order to refute it, in fact, it would be necessary to demonstrate that the world of our experience can be completely explained by some factors which are immanent to it, i.e. that it is an absolute – a result that a scientific theory could hardly aspire to obtain.

To tell the truth, at the end of the twentieth century the main alternative advanced by scientists to the metaphysics of transcendence, i. e. to theism, is not a metaphysics of immanence, of the same kind of positivism, or materialism, as was evident in the nineteenth century. At the end of the twentieth century a large proportion of scientists think that the alternative to metaphysics is an appeal to pure chance. This is the thesis that the whole universe, with its present structure and order, including the existence of life and man, is the result of an infinite series of changes which are exclusively due to chance. This position seems to me to be an abandonment of an exhaustive explanation rather than a claim to a perfect explanation of the universe through reference to its internal factors. But, in fact, if chance is considered the only possible explanation for the universe, it becomes an exhaustive explanation, i.e. an explanation which considers the universe as perfectly self-sufficient and does not admit further research, an explanation which is completely self-sufficient.

This kind of approach, it seems to me, is the negation not only of the philosophical spirit but also of scientific research and in general of any critical sense. The existence itself of science and philosophy, and their continual and perhaps infinite desire for knowledge is the best refutation of

this approach. This never satisfied desire for knowledge, like the awareness of an incomplete and inadequate explanation of the universe, is not only a requirement of human reason, but – in a realistic perspective, which is the prevailing attitude of scientists – it corresponds to a real feature of the universe itself, i.e. to its inability to explain itself completely, to having within itself all those factors which are necessary to its complete explanation. In this way, the metaphysics of transcendence turns out to be not only the necessary condition for compatibility between science and religion, but also the necessary condition for a genuine scientific approach towards the universe, i. e. a fair admission of the problematic character of our experience of the world.