

A RESPONSE (II) TO GERALD McCool

In his presentation today Professor McCool has given us a brief survey of the history of neo-Thomist philosophy with the suggestion that Catholic theologians still have much to learn from these philosophers. In my response, I will first state my understanding of McCool's position before proceeding to reflect upon the constructive question that it raises. Tentatively stated, my concern is a general one: Does the Catholic version of Christian faith require a specific doctrine about philosophy? In other words, does the Catholic theologian already possess a pre-set agenda when she or he looks around for appropriate philosophical conversation partners? And if she or he does, what may this agenda mean in relation to current struggles over the limits and possibilities of philosophical and theological pluralism? I understand my question as simply an attempt to pursue further the reflections outlined at the end of McCool's paper.

McCool's presentation gives us a preliminary assessment of the constructive implications of his research into the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Catholic theology. Specifically, his research into the history of neo-Thomist philosophy suggests the following conclusions: (1) First, that there were three "irreducible" types of neo-Thomism: the "classical Thomism" of Jacques Maritain, the "historical Thomism" of Etienne Gilson, and the "transcendental Thomism" of Maréchal, Rahner and Lonergan. Furthermore, McCool's work shows that these types are interrelated in a variety of complex ways, ranging from arguments over the most adequate historical interpretation of St. Thomas' own philosophy to controversy over the compatibility of Thomism with various degrees of theological pluralism. (2) Second, that there were three significant interventions on the part of the magisterium which provided guidance to Catholic theologians in their appropriation of neo-Thomist philosophy, namely, *Aeterni Patris*, 1879; *Humani generis*, 1950; and Vatican II's *Optatam totius*, 1965; and that the history of the relationship between theology and neo-Thomist philosophy is unintelligible apart from these interventions. (3) Third, that due to a combination of internal and external factors, it appears that we may have witnessed an end to the "evolution" of neo-Thomism. But perhaps it is too early to tell whether that end marks an *Aufhebung* or an *Aufhebung* for neo-Thomism.

McCool then goes on to draw some of the constructive implications from these conclusions, the chief of which is that Catholic

theologians—even in a post-neo-Thomist situation—still have much to learn from these philosophers, since they grasped at least “the right questions to ask if one wishes to verify the critical grounding of a philosophical or theological method.” To illustrate this point, McCool mentions four issues, (1) objectivity, (2) epistemology and metaphysics, (3) pluralism without relativism, and (4) the role of philosophy in the integration of knowledge. His contention is that the neo-Thomists have much to teach us on these subjects, and that any well-founded Catholic theology inevitably will have to address them, if it is to exhibit any measure of coherence and adequacy.

Upon reading these conclusions, my initial reaction was one of puzzlement: Who could object to conclusions as seemingly innocuous and sensible as these? Further reflection, however, suggested that some difficult questions were involved here.

First and foremost, there is the problem of pluralism. McCool's paper alluded to an unprecedented situation, but did not discuss it: “Ecclesiastical authority has ceased to impose a unitary method,” and consequently, a variety of non-Thomistic theologies abound. McCool cites the example of Walter Kasper's retrieval of the post-Kantian Tübingen theology. One could mention as well the development of political theologies and theologies of liberation which claim to be based on non-Thomistic philosophies of praxis. Even closer to home, there are the projects formulated by Lonergan's students, for example, David Burrell's creative appropriation of the legacy of Wittgenstein, and David Tracy's explorations of the constructive theological possibilities latent in American pragmatism and process philosophy. Most recently we find Hans Küng's massive construction, *On Being a Christian*, which places—somewhat naively, I think—the history of religions and New Testament historical criticism in the role once reserved for Thomist philosophy in Catholic theological method. And these are only some of the more serious representatives of the new pluralism. Not surprisingly, each of them has generated philosophical and theological controversy. One finds David Burrell accused of “fideism,”¹ and David Tracy, of a “reductionism” that obscures the supernatural.² No doubt someone also will come along to show how Hans Küng has embarked upon a path that leads inevitably to “historicism” and its problems. In my opinion,

¹W. J. Hill, O.P., “Religious Understanding: Running through Burrell's ‘Exercises,’” *The Journal of Religion* 57, 2 (April, 1977), 169-82.

²A. Dulles, S.J., “Method in Fundamental Theology: Reflections on David Tracy's *Blessed Rage for Order*,” *Theological Studies* 37, 2 (June, 1976), 304-16.

these accusations cannot be dismissed out of hand as merely the predictable reactions of inveterate heresy-hunters. (But neither are they to be endorsed as the last word, especially in the cases of Burrell and Tracy.) As I read them, these suspicions—although usually expressed in substantively theological terms—represent a fundamental anxiety over what happens once the pluralism of philosophies is translated into a pluralism of theological methods. My own hunch is that this anxiety is rooted not so much in a concern for philosophical uniformity as it is in a religious and theological concern for the integrity of Catholic faith.

When viewed in such a context, McCool's research and reflections may allow us an opportunity to do some timely self-examination. This self-examination, it seems to me, hinges upon a question of fact: What, if anything, does Catholic theology require of philosophy? If we can formulate a coherent answer to that question, then we may be able to move on to an important question of interpretation: What philosophies—if any—provide what Catholic theology requires? And beyond that question there may loom a decision: What if *none* of the various contemporary philosophies provide what Catholic theology requires? What then?

In exploring the question of fact I assume that the magisterium is still the most reliable guide to the requirements of Catholic ecclesiastical theology. On this assumption, we may refer our question to the documents cited by McCool: *Aeterni Patris*, *Humani generis*, and *Optatam totius*. In that context the question becomes: What were the *theological* reasons recommending neo-Thomism in the first place? Are those reasons still relevant for our post-neo-Thomist conversation with philosophy?

The reasons given in the documents are fairly consistent throughout: neo-Thomism provides "a firm foundation for a sound Catholic apologetics"; it can "safeguard the proper distinction between faith and reason, nature and grace"; it enables the theologian "to defend and explain the Christian mysteries without falling into the extremes of fideism and rationalism." In addition, neo-Thomism is commended for its ability to "preserve the proper distinction between apologetics, speculative and moral theology." Now I would simply point out that these reasons, taken as a whole, express systematic theological exigencies. It would not occur to a philosopher *qua* philosopher to commend his philosophy for these reasons. I would also add that I do not find *Optatam totius* altering the situation in any appreciable way: *philosophia perennis*, specifically, "speculative reason exercised under the tutelage of St. Thomas," (*Optatam totius*, 16) is recommended for its help in

understanding the mysteries of faith. Of course, "contemporary philosophical investigations" are also put on the students' agenda. But the suggestion is that these will help promote "a correct understanding of the character of modern times" and "dialogue with the men of their own day" (*Optatam totius*, 15). Nowhere does it suggest that students should be converted to them.

It would seem, then, that the magisterium is still rather uncompromising on the subject of philosophy and theology. *Optatam totius* merely restates more attractively what was already there in the forbidding rhetoric of *Humani generis*:

... [W]e may clothe our philosophy in a more convenient and richer dress, make it more vigorous with a more effective terminology, divest it of certain scholastic aids found less useful, prudently enrich it with the fruits of progress of the human mind. But never may we overthrow it, or contaminate it with false principles, or regard it as a great, but obsolete relic ... (*Humani generis*, 30).

The reference, of course, is to *philosophia perennis*, which *Humani generis* assumes is identical with classical neo-Thomism.

If this is the case with the magisterium, on what ground can the promoters of philosophical and theological pluralism stand? Their case—and it is a compelling one, it seems to me—rests upon another fact: neo-Thomism—at least in its classical form—failed to measure up to the theological tasks so hopefully assigned to it. It was unable to provide the basis for an adequate conversation between Catholic tradition and the real world—the modern world—in which we all live. In failing to measure up as philosophy, unwittingly it also failed theology. A tragic consequence, it seems to me, is that in the process the basic agenda for Catholic theology, specifically, its own requirements of any conversation with philosophy, were often discredited as well. Given this situation, the serious promoters of pluralism—those previously mentioned—have taken the risk of exploring philosophical alternatives. As I understand them, each in his own way is struggling to preserve the basic agenda of Catholic theology, although some appear to be more successful in this than others. As innovators, they all seem to realize that they speak only for themselves, and necessarily so. And yet the Catholic community must carefully consider their proposals, if only because of its painful awareness of a possible loss of focus with the passing of neo-Thomism, and our collective aspirations for it.

That's how the situation stands, or so it seems to me. In reflecting upon McCool's research, I conclude that Catholic theology does require a specific agenda from philosophy, an agenda

designated by the appropriately ambiguous term, *philosophia perennis*. On the other hand, it is clear that in our own time there is no consensus as to which philosophy adequately expresses *philosophia perennis*. Nor given the cultural diversity of our modern world, and the inability of any institution to exercise effective control over the meanings by which we live, is it likely that any one candidate will ever be agreed upon. Nevertheless, the effort to express the perennial philosophy must always be made, and initially at least that effort will inevitably take the form of a quest for *good* philosophy. Finally, my hunch is that *good* philosophy will best be pursued if we begin—as Bernard Lonergan put it so eloquently the other day—by gaining a clear understanding of just “who in fact we are.”

DENNIS P. McCANN
Reed College
Portland, Oregon