

LESSON 5

THE BIBLE, THE REFORMATION AND PHILOSOPHY

Introduction

The last chapter clarified that St. Thomas Aquinas spent a great deal of energy in retiring St. Augustine from the position of dominating Christian thought. This was only possible to him as he discovered Aristotle's formidable attacks on Plato's weaknesses. His affinity for "this worldly" theology found a powerful ally in Aristotle's theory of reality. Aquinas was strongly influenced by his belief in creation and the linear view of time as over against the Neo-Platonic insistence upon "emanations" and cyclical time. Aquinas was able to move Christian thought from an ontological view to a cosmological one. This enthroned a rational method and a possible "natural theology;" it also opened the way for a "scientific method" in western philosophical thought.

Duns Scotus (1266-1308)

"The philosophers who followed Aquinas modified his theories. Many, like Duns Scotus . . . rejected the fundamentals of his belief."¹ Duns Scotus was born in the British Isles. He studied at the Franciscan monastery at Dumfries and at Oxford. He then studied in Paris in 1302. In 1303 he was banished for his opposition to King Philip IV. He received his doctorate at Paris in 1305 and went to Cologne in 1307, where he died in 1308.

Scotus was deeply influenced by St. Augustine. Being a Franciscan, he was a natural opponent to Aquinas who was a Dominican. He had read Anselm and the Arabians. He partly agreed with Aquinas, but partly disagreed. Scotus emphasized the priority of the will in man and God, whereas Thomas Aquinas had maintained the priority of reason. For Scotus, theology ranked above philosophy. He came close to a view of the double nature of truth, but made it clear that "there is no inherent conflict between faith and reason."² He maintained that theology is practical, not theoretical, in its aim. He treated universals in the mode of a *moderate realism*. "In his theory of reality he held that there are subtle distinctions in types of form and matter, and on the question of the principle of individuation he maintained that there is a factor distinct from both form and matter."³

In ethics Scotus believed that *the commandments were*

UNDERLINE the best answer.

Thomas Aquinas did, did not open the way for a
"scientific" method in Western philosophical thought.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Duns Scotus was deeply influenced by St.

(Augustine)

Scotus ranked _____ above

(theology, philosophy)

¹Frederick Mayer, *A History of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (New York: American Book Company, 1950), p. 473.

²Albert E. Avey, *Handbook in the History of Philosophy*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1961), p. 107.

³Ibid.

so because God said they were so. He was important because:

1. He taught the supremacy of the will.
2. He insisted upon unconditional obedience to the will of God.
3. He rated theology more important than philosophy.
4. He was an important critic and almost defeated Scholasticism.

William of Ockham (ca. 1280—ca. 1349)

William of Ockham (Occam) came to conclude that proofs for the existence of God are unconvincing and that Anselm and Aquinas try to prove rationally that which must be a matter of faith.

John Wycliffe (1320-1384)

Long before the common western man had access to the Bible for reading (ca. 1460), John Wycliffe subordinated tradition to the right of the individual to formulate his own interpretation of things upon the basis of Scripture and reason. He began the translation of the Bible into English and distributed it among the common people.

Wycliffe died of a heart disease, but his body was exhumed and burned after a decree of the Council of Constance in 1415.

John Hus (1369-1415)

John Hus was a follower of Wycliffe and the rector of the University of Prague. He criticized the selling of indulgences. He was invited to the Council of Constance where he was arrested, condemned and burned at the stake. His ashes were thrown out on the Rhine River.

The Bible

The issue that was basic to the controversies over the Bible and the Tradition of the Church was the nature of "Apostolic Authority."

Toward the middle of the second century (A.D. 150) "Only the words of Jesus . . . carried the fullest authority. At the same time, the apostles were gradually acquiring . . . a collateral, though subordinate, authority"⁴ (cf. Eph. 2:20 and Rev. 21:9-14). *What was apostolic became canonical.* If there was a doubt about authorship, it was not canonical.

At the beginning of the third century there was already a New Testament Canon. The four Gospels and the thirteen letters of Paul were now beyond dispute. Revelation also seems to have been well established. Hebrews was

⁴F. W. Beare, "Canon of the New Testament," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, G. A. Butterick, ed., Vol. I (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 525a.

Give four reasons for the importance of Duns Scotus.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

William of Ockham concluded that proofs for the existence of God are _____ .
(unconvincing)

List things done by John Wycliffe that contributed to his condemnation at the Council of Constance in 1415.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

The basic issue in controversies over the Bible and Church Tradition was the nature of _____ .

(Apostolic Authority)

The writings of the Apostles gradually acquired _____ .

(authority)

yet in question as were the universal epistles with the exception of 1 John.⁵

However, the accessibility of these canonized New Testament writings was indeed critical, perhaps to the extent that much error crept into Christendom because of the ignorance of the Scripture—especially of the apostolic epistles. Tradition had it that the Bishops received *apostolic succession* upon being ordained. This afforded the Bishops an authority of pronouncement, especially when they met in Ecumenical Councils that were second only to the Lord Himself.

Little by little not only the interpretation of Scripture but the Bible itself was allotted an authority inferior to that of the ordained clergy, especially the authority of the Roman Catholic Pope when he spoke *ex cathedra*. In other branches of Christian life it took even longer to come to some agreement on the writings that could be canonized.

Peter Lombard (ca. 1100—ca. 1160)

Peter Lombard sought to compile the opinions of the Fathers and Teachers of the early Catholic Church. It was assumed that these theological opinions were very similar to apostolic opinions, and therefore authoritative. His writings were the *Four Books of Sentences*. "The *Libri IV Sententiarum* was used as a textbook in Catholic theology for more than two centuries."⁶ It was well known and consulted often in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Theological studies were based on the works of Lombard in Paris during those centuries.⁷ John Calvin refers to Lombard as a "schoolman" and rejected his point of view because he defended "the Papal Mass."

Scholasticism and Humanism

Modern philosophy became possible through the dialectic between Scholasticism and Humanism. The term "Scholasticism" refers to "those medieval schools of thought which were concerned with defining and systematizing the Christian understanding of reality . . ."⁸ There was no single system among the Scholastics, and a thorough treatment of the term would require the volume of an entire book. "Schoolmen" or the *Doctores Scholastici* were those who taught the seven liberal arts or theology in the cloister and the schools of the Cathedral. The "schoolmen" were the teachers and leading thinkers of the medieval period who were admittedly influenced by the Greek philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, Neo-Platonism and the like. Anselm of Canterbury, William of Champeaux, Roscelin, and Abelard

⁵Ibid., p. 529a.

⁶Dagobert D. Runes, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1967), p. 184.

⁷Frederick Mayer, p. 440.

⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV: 18:1 note. I. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), Vol. 2, p. 1429. Cf. Colin Brown, p. 18.

Bishops gained authority through a _____
s _____.

(apostolic succession)

The Bible's authority became inferior to that of the
o _____ c _____.

(ordained clergy)

Is the following statement true or false?

The opinions of the Fathers and Teachers of the early Catholic Church were accepted as authoritative because they were considered to be similar to apostolic opinions. _____

(true)

Answer true or false.

Scholasticism refers to those medieval schools of thought which were concerned with defining and systematizing the Christian understanding of reality. It was a completely new approach to the Christian religion, absolutely uninfluenced by Greek philosophers. _____

(false)

were important "schoolmen." It has been suggested above that perhaps the most important among them was St. Thomas Aquinas. Meister Eckhart reacted to the dry and rigid intellectualism which so often characterized Scholasticism. His was among the first such reactions, but by no means the last. In one sense, the Protestant Reformation was a reaction against Scholasticism by the new Humanism ("Any view in which the welfare and happiness of mankind in this life is primary"). The Humanism of the Reformation was a direct result of the Renaissance Humanism which was a revolt *against limitations* on knowledge, "with a revival of classical learning and a stress on man's enjoying this existence to the utmost."¹⁰

The Humanism of Reformation times is far and away different from twentieth-century Humanism which is a godless, this worldly, fatalistic religion.¹¹

Humanism and History

The Bible is a powerful book. Not only had the way been prepared for an explosive revolutionary effect to follow the distribution of the Bible and the general interest *elicited thereby*, but this new access to firm "Apostolic Authority" superseding episcopal interpretation weakened the iron-bound authority of the Roman Catholic church. The clergy could no longer claim spiritual authority for poorly articulated politics and international control of government.

However, beyond the Bible, the thought of Humanists who challenged the Church in matters of biblical scholarship (Erasmus), political science (Niccolo Machiavelli), natural scientific thought (Leonardo Da Vinci), and the intrinsic worth of man (Marsilio Ficino) set the scenario for more radical people like the Reformers to put radical revolution into motion.

Nationalism was beginning to splinter the Holy Roman Empire, which was neither holy nor Roman nor an Empire in the real sense of the term.

The Church had become terribly decadent and immoral. Although Alexander VI and the Borgia Family (Pope, 1492-1503) may not be typical of that decadence, they illustrated how low the church could tolerate immorality in high places, as well as a patent lack of interest in the spiritual aspect of life. Charles V was not able to stop Luther because the German Knights and Electors so hated the "Roman" or Italian domination of their world that they whisked Luther away to Wartburg and protected him there from the debilitated, almost defunct "Empire."

At this historical distance, it is perfectly clear that the Reformation was not just a religious revival. It was a whole new interpretation of life—religious, political, economic,

A view in which the welfare and happiness of mankind in this life is primary is known as _____.

(humanism)

The humanism of the Reformation is different from modern-day _____.

(humanism)

The distribution of the Bible and its use weakened the authority of the _____.

(Catholic Church)

Is the following statement true or false?

The thought of humanists set the stage for radical changes, i.e., the Reformation. _____

(true)

The Reformation was more than a religious _____. It was a whole new _____ of life.

(revival, interpretation)

⁹Dagobert D. Runes, p. 131.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 132.

¹¹Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 227. See the creed of Modern Humanism—the basic philosophy of western education.

educational, social and domestic. In reality, the Reformation, which was basically religious at the beginning, set off a chain reaction of philosophical revolution. In turn, it splintered the Church and made "*Humanistic Man*" the centre of universal concern.

Although that revolution is still going on, it has really run its course. The "moment of truth" has nearly arrived. Communism as "a way of life" came into being as a direct result of humanistic philosophy,¹² but communism, as such, has never been realized. Russia would be the first to admit this. Protestantism is at its weakest phase. Catholicism would have collapsed long ago if it had not been for the discovery of the Americas and Spanish colonialism. Now the infiltration of Humanism into Roman Catholic Liberation Theology threatens not only Latin American Catholicism, but the very Church itself. John Paul II is alarmed and is reacting strongly.

Humanism from the Renaissance until the present has been antagonistic toward the authority of the Church. Aristotle's system of ethics eventually seeped through the syncretistic accommodations of the thirteenth-century theologians. He had affirmed that the goal of ethics is not the achievement of supernatural bliss but happiness that can be achieved on earth.¹³ "It is now clear that the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the cradle of modern thought."¹⁴

If Catholicism took on a decisive form and frame of thought in the Middle Ages, protestant thought and theology stemmed from the sixteenth century. No Protestant would have admitted such a thing at that time, but such a conclusion is obvious now.

Reformation Leaders

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Martin Luther was present at the right place at the right time. He was nine years old when Columbus discovered the Americas. "Without Luther the Reformation would have taken a different course, but it would have happened all the same."¹⁵ Luther was preoccupied with the German Bible and the liturgy of the new departure.

Zwingli (1484-1531) and John Calvin (1509-1564)

In Switzerland both Zwingli and Calvin led their own kind of Reformation based upon humanistic studies. However, they believed that Humanism was *not* enough. Their very environment demanded that they be practical men. It would seem that the diversity of background and training they had would have produced terrible arguments like the one they had over the Lord's supper. But there was a unity that overcame these points of diversity based upon two

¹²Cf. Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, 1516.

¹³Frederick Mayer, p. 175.

¹⁴Colin Brown, p. 37.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 41.

Three major reformers on the Continent were:

(Compare your answers with the text.)

aspects of their discoveries—a new and personal knowledge of God, and a serious interest in the world and man in particular.¹⁶

Zwingli wrote as little as possible because he was a man of action and political consciousness.¹⁷ He died in battle. John Calvin took a more scholarly interest in the thought of the Reformation. He wrote his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It was not as voluminous as Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, but it was equally influential upon the theology of the Reform on the Continent.

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600)

Before closing this chapter it may be worthwhile to mention Giordano Bruno. He was a Dominican but cast aside the garb and wandered about in Europe. He was reported to have later joined the Reformed Church. This, too, he found quite unsatisfactory. He was arrested by the Inquisition in Venice, and after seven years in prison, he was burned at the stake. He was a pantheist and a severe critic of Aristotle. He was typical of many who were victims of the radical changes of his time—confused and abused.

In England, unlike the Reformation on the Continent, the break away from Rome was strictly political in its beginning. Henry VIII wanted a divorce which the Pope would not allow. Therefore, the religion of England became a "Catholicism without the Pope."¹⁸ However, Crammer, Ridley and Latimer took advantage of the situation to reform England in accord with the Word of God.¹⁹

Luther's sermon, "The Devil's Whore" was a tirade against philosophy—all philosophy. He called Aristotle all sorts of insulting names. "But as modern research has shown, Luther was not condemning reason, as such."²⁰ Luther used reason powerfully against his enemies. What he hated was the fanciful abuse of reason. Luther approved "three lights" which helped to explain human existence: nature, grace, and glory. The light of nature is apprehended by reason and common sense, grace by the revelation of the Bible and through faith. Glory is left to the future when God will act to reveal even more to those who seek Him.

The Reformers of the sixteenth century were dominated by a concern for God. They took as their starting-point God's action in Christ, as witnessed to by the Scriptures. From there they proceeded to think about the world. The rationalists of the seventeenth century were absorbed not so much by God but by the world . . . they were intrigued with the rational structure of the universe. And the view they took of the latter decided the role they assigned to God in their scheme.²¹

¹⁶Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁷Read the case of Felix Manz in Zurich. Cf. Thomas Lindsay, *A History of the Reformation*, Vol. II (Edinburgh: Frank T. Clark, 1964), p. 447.

¹⁸Colin Brown, p. 42.

¹⁹Cf. The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1571) in the *Common Book of Prayer*.

²⁰Colin Brown, p. 44.

²¹Ibid., p. 49.

List two things that helped the European reformers to overcome most of their differences.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Is the following statement true or false?

John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* had little or no effect on the theology of the Reform on the Continent. _____

(false)

The Reformation in England was strictly political in the _____.

(beginning)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. According to the author, what opened the way for a scientific method in Western philosophical thought?

2. List reasons given by the author for the importance of Duns Scotus in the study of philosophy.

3. How did William of Ockham differ with Anselm and Aquinas?

4. Why was the body of John Wycliffe exhumed and burned years after his death?

5. What effect did Apostolic Authority have on the Church?

6. Identify Scholasticism and Humanism.

7. What effect did Bible distribution have on the Catholic Church?

8. What effect did the thought of Humanists have on the Medieval Church?

9. What did the Reformation bring about?

10. Name three reformers of the Reformation on the Continent.

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11. Name two things that enabled the European reformers to overcome most of their differences.

 12. What Reformation writing had a profound effect upon the theology of the Reform on the Continent? Who was its author?

 13. How was the Reformation in England different from the one on the Continent?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 37-47 in Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* and answer the following:

1. Explain the relation of medieval thought to Roman Catholicism as over against that of the Reformation to Protestantism.
2. What was the radical theological position of Faustus Socinus?
3. Name two great discoveries of the leaders of the Reformation. What influence did this have on Natural Theology?
4. What were the distinctive contributions of Martin Luther? John Calvin? Henry VIII?

Advanced activity (*Level 3*).

1. Discuss at length the relation between philosophy and religion according to the Reformers.
2. What are a "host of questions" raised by the divine Scriptures? (See Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, page 45.)
3. What is the influence of Anselm on the study of the Scriptures in the Reformation? Explain in detail. (See Brown, page 47.)
4. Explain Calvin's spectacles. (See Brown, page 48.)

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss Brown's affirmation about the Reformation thought and its development as the "cradle of modern thought."
2. Why is the Protestant system often cited as the basis of Humanistic thought?
3. Discuss Luther's "three lights" that illuminate human existence. (See Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, page 44.)