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## *PART II: POPE PAUL VI AND PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION*

### **PAUL VI'S ADVOCACY OF THE 'PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY'**

*by Brian W. Harrison*

In the first part of our continuing study of Pope Paul VI's importance for biblical scholarship (cf. *Living Tradition*, nos. 153-158) we have focused on this pontiff's general perspective regarding Sacred Scripture – his commitment to bring to fruition the Council's call for a fuller and more efficacious pastoral use of Scripture in the Church's life and worship and his ambivalent attitude – oscillating between openness and caution – to the challenges presented by modern biblical scholarship. In this second part we shall devote four essays to this Pontiff's magisterial contributions regarding certain basic principles which must underly an authentically Catholic understanding of the Bible.

In classical terminology this area of inquiry would be considered that of 'hermeneutics'.<sup>1</sup> In recent history, however, the increasing application of that term to those studies deriving largely from the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) in the nineteenth century, and from existentialist currents influenced by Martin Heidegger in the twentieth, has tended in practice to leave the word 'hermeneutics' with a more specialized meaning. For that reason we shall use less technical terminology for the overall theme of Part II, referring simply to the norms for 'understanding' or 'interpreting' Scripture which, in the teaching of Paul VI, should be adhered to by Catholic students of the inspired word.

Following a time-honored pedagogical procedure in presenting material in this field, we shall divide these interpretative principles into those deriving from reason and revelation respectively – that is, broadly speaking, philosophical and theological principles. Just as grace perfects nature, and does not supplant it, so the understanding of specifically Christian truth must necessarily be based on an epistemology capable of giving a clear vision of truth in general. In the first two essays in this section, accordingly, we shall consider what Paul VI had to say about these 'natural' or rational principles for a sound understanding of reality. This issue of *Living Tradition* will present the Pope's warm recommendation of certain principles situated within the tradition of Thomistic realism, while the following essay will consider in more detail how he applied such principles to an evaluation of recent studies in the field of hermeneutics – in the more modern, specialized sense of that word referred to above.

In the document which Pope Paul VI intended and understood as the most solemn act of his entire personal magisterial ministry as chief teacher of the Catholic faith, a most important hermeneutical observation is found in the preamble to the twenty-three articles that follow. It clearly represents the Pope's carefully-meditated attempt to crystallize in a brief formula the most fundamental epistemological principles which he is convinced must be upheld as the basis of

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., gives a useful summary of what is meant by "hermeneutics" in this broader sense: "As logic is to thinking and grammar to speaking, so hermeneutics is to exegesis. It is a manner of second reflection on what one is about when one interprets a text. 'Hermeneutics' is derived from Greek *hermeneia*, 'interpretation', and seeks to set forth the laws of interpreting, as logic formulates those of thinking and grammar those of speaking or writing." *The Biblical Commission's Document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church": Text and Commentary*, Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1995, 109-110.

**Editor:** Msgr. John F. McCarthy, J.C.D., S.T.D.

**Associate Editor:** Rev. Brian W. Harrison, O.S., M.A., S.T.D.

Please address all correspondence to: [www.rtforum.org](http://www.rtforum.org) e-mail: <jfm@rtforum.org>

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an authentic interpretation of the sources of faith – of which Sacred Scripture, as the very Word of God, is in a certain sense pre-eminent. Equally clearly, the Pope sees current neglect or rejection of these principles as the source of the widespread and perilous errors against the faith which have prompted this solemn intervention. In article 5 of his 1968 Solemn Profession of Faith (the “Credo of the People of God”), immediately after he rebukes the “lust for change and innovation” which is now causing “disturbance and doubt in many faithful souls,” the Pontiff makes the following affirmations of fundamental significance for all rational understanding and interpretation:

. . . It is of the greatest importance to realize that beyond that observable level which is the object of scientific investigation, our God-given intelligence is capable of attaining **that which is**, and not only the subjective notions of the so-called “structures” and evolution of human consciousness. Moreover, it must be stressed that this applies to interpretation or hermeneutics: so that after having observed the words enunciated in a certain text, we must strive to discern and understand the text’s own intrinsic meaning, rather than somehow altering that meaning to suit our free speculation.<sup>2</sup>

It will be well for us to pay careful attention to this statement, which the Pope evidently regarded as providing us with the key to his entire analysis and diagnosis of the confusion over matters of faith in the modern Church.

It goes without saying that philosophical developments **alone** cannot be made to bear the full responsibility for the secularization of Western society in recent centuries, and for the deleterious influence of this process in turn upon orthodox religious faith and practice within the Western Church. Scientific, technological, economic and political changes, as well as an increased skepticism about the claims of any supposedly revealed religion after the disastrous wars of religion in the 16th and 17th centuries, are among the other factors which have also played a key role in contributing to Western man’s growing sense of self-sufficiency and religious indifference during the last three or four centuries. Nevertheless, none of these developments has itself been divorced from philosophical currents. What happens in the academy has nearly always been a catalyst for change (or, at times, an impediment to change) in other spheres of social life, as well as providing theoretical justifications – and therefore further momentum – for processes and movements which have already been initiated in the palace, the parliament, the workplace, the laboratory, the observatory, or the battlefield. For this reason the Catholic Church has always insisted on a basic philosophical formation as an underpinning for the theological studies of her future leaders, realizing that as grace builds on nature, sound faith should be built upon sound reasoning about the most fundamental realities: being, knowledge, God, man, matter, spirit, good and evil. Bimillennial experience has taught the Church never to underestimate the power – for good or evil – of philosophy.

## 1. Epistemological Realism

In stressing that the human mind given to us by God “is capable of attaining **that which is**,” and not merely what appears to the senses or to the inner subjective consciousness, Pope Paul would seem to be referring in general terms to the revolution in Western and Christian thought which began with the publication of René Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* in 1637.<sup>3</sup>

The ‘perennial philosophy’ which Christian thinkers had developed through centuries of reflection on the classical Greek heritage **begins** with the common-sense wisdom of affirming that the mind immediately grasps an objective reality outside of itself. By overturning this basic and natural insight of the human intelligence in order to question by methodical doubt the reality of everything except the primordial experience of pure thought itself, Descartes’ rationalism – a misplaced attempt to make abstract mathematical clarity and certitude the criterion for all knowledge – opened up a gulf

<sup>2</sup> “Ad hanc rem quod spectat, summi est momenti animadvertere, præter id quod observabile est, scientiarumque ope recognitum, intellegentiam a Deo nobis datam **id quod est** attingere posse, non vero tantummodo significationes subiectivas structurarum, quas vocant, et evolutionis humane conscientiae. Ceterum recolendum est, illud ad interpretationem seu ad hermeneuma pertinere, ut verbo, quod pronuntiatum est, observato, intellegere et discernere studeamus sensum textui cuidam subiectum, non vero hunc sensum ad coniecturæ arbitratum quodammodo novare” (AAS 60 [1968], 435, emphasis in original).

<sup>3</sup> Further reading on the history of Western philosophy since Descartes could include the following: AA. VV., *Essere e Libertà: studi in onore di Cornelio Fabro* (Rimini: Maggioli, 1984); E. Bréhier, *Historia de la Filosofía*, vol. 2 (*moderna y contemporanea*), tr. D. Náñez (Buenos Aires: Ed. Sudamericana, 1948); N.J.H. Dent, *A Rousseau Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); E. Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1937); S. Houlgate, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Criticism of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1986); D.W. Hudson & D.W. Moran (eds.), *The Future of Thomism* (Notre Dame, Indiana: American Maritain Association, 1992); A. Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); B. Mondin, *I filosofi dell’occidente*, vols. 2 & 3 (Rome: Coines, 2nd. edn., 1973); S. Voss (ed.), *Essays on the Philosophy and Science of René Descartes* (Oxford & New York: O.U.P., 1993); J. Young, *The Scope of Philosophy* (Sydney: Warrane College Monographs, 2008).

between the mind and external reality which in over three centuries has never really been bridged by those who accept his starting-point as their own. As Etienne Gilson observes:

No one who knows the ulterior destiny of Descartes' doctrine can read without surprise the heedless sentence with which his VIth *Meditation* begins: "Nothing further now remains, but to enquire whether material things exist." So far was he from fearing any difficulty on the point that, when some readers told him he was headed for trouble, Descartes refused to believe it. Yet, he had been warned.<sup>4</sup>

Here the wisdom of one of the twentieth century's greatest Thomist scholars certainly coincides with the practical sanity of the unlettered layman. A philosopher who begins by **doubting** "whether material things exist" would indeed seem to be "headed for trouble" from that point onwards. And if he has not overcome his doubts after five profound "Meditations," this does not seem to augur well for the sixth – or the seventh, or the eighth. . . .

The Pope refers to the "structures . . . and evolution of human consciousness," and insists that true knowledge can reach beyond the observable phenomena studied by the sciences. This is apparently a reference to the basic error of Kant, whose philosophy – perhaps more than that of any other individual thinker – has been of major significance in contributing to that loss of faith, that agnosticism, which has become the ideological "orthodoxy" of a Western culture that now finds itself disintegrating in intellectual scepticism and moral nihilism.

Once Descartes had made thought, rather than being, the primary object of all knowledge, the predictable result was David Hume's skepticism about all intelligibility in the world outside the flux of sensory experience. Appalled by this apparent theoretical destruction of science itself, at the very time when scientists were registering such brilliant successes in the practical sphere, Kant sought to rescue theoretical knowledge by reclassifying the principles of intelligibility – above all those of substance and causality – as "categories" **imposed** by the mind upon external reality, rather than **discerned** by the mind as already present in that reality. After all, this is what Newton did with such spectacular success (or so it seemed before the advent of Einstein) in the realm of physics: the scientist observes sensory data in nature, and then elaborates in his mind concepts and hypotheses which coordinate them, systematize them under "laws," and enable us to predict the results of future observations and experiments. By making the method of natural science normative for all knowledge, however, Kant paid a high price for this presumed "salvation" of human understanding from the skepticism into which the "Cartesian experiment" (as Gilson calls it) had led Western philosophy. Knowledge itself was now, as it were, turned into a debased coinage: true knowledge, for Kant, is of the **phenomena** only. Whether the phenomena, interpreted by the mind, produce true (if limited) insight into external reality, as the 'perennial philosophy' maintains, or whether they distort that reality partially or completely – this is eternally unknowable, said Kant. Metaphysics was thus discredited as an illusion endemic to the human mind; and together with metaphysics was undermined any rational knowledge of the existence of God as First Cause. Since Kant, then, the increasingly dominant intellectual orthodoxy in Western culture has been an illusory confidence in the natural sciences as the foundation of human progress, accompanied by growing skepticism, confusion, and complete indifference in regard to ultimate truths and values.<sup>5</sup> All this is encapsulated in the brief, but telling, diagnosis given by Paul VI in the preamble to his solemn reaffirmation of the apostolic faith, at a time when the legacy of Descartes and Kant, having exercised a long and gradually increasing influence on Western thought which by no means left Catholic philosophy and theology unaffected, was erupting in an open and virulent epidemic of doubt, uncertainty and contestation in the climate of change, experimentation and

<sup>4</sup> E. Gilson, *op. cit.*, 198.

<sup>5</sup> The Eastern half of old Christendom, under the imposition of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, took a different path (at least at the level of official state ideology) for much of the twentieth century. As Gilson stresses, man is a perennially metaphysical animal, and if someone can offer a world-view which purports to give us knowledge of reality **itself** – the *noumenon* which Kantian orthodoxy says is unattainable – while at the same time claiming that this knowledge is "scientific," this will always find a receptive audience. Gilson accurately explains much of the appeal of communism among modern intellectuals as follows: "Whatever else it may be, Communism is emphatically **not** a scepticism. . . . More than forty times, in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin came back to this central position in his philosophy, that Hume had begotten Kant, who in turn had begotten Mill, Mach, Huxley, Cohen, Renouvier, Poincaré, Duhem, James, and all the exponents of what he calls the 'Humean agnosticism.' In a clumsy way, but with penetrating philosophical insight, Lenin insists that despite the petty changes 'made in the terminology or argument of preceding systems' all these doctrines are, basically, so many variations of the fundamental philosophy of Hume. Had he to write it today, Lenin would not be obliged to modify his judgment" (*op. cit.*, 289-290). And Hume in turn, as we have noted, and as Gilson strongly insists, simply brought to its inevitable sceptical "breakdown" the philosophical revolution initiated by René Descartes. However, in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, simultaneously with the decline of Marxist dogmatism in the East, we are seeing in the West, parallel with that ethical uncertainty that Pope Benedict XVI famously called "the dictatorship of relativism", the rise of a new but perverse form of ethical absolutism. This not only embodies the unqualified negation of certain key moral absolutes of the Judeo-Christian tradition (insisting, for instance, that there is an "invulnerable human right" of a woman to abort her unborn child, and of same-sex couples to "marry"), but goes so far as to brand unreservedly as intolerable "bigotry" and "hate" any and every expression of dissent from these new secular dogmas.

innovation which developed in the Church during and immediately after the Council.

On other occasions the Pope warned of this epidemic of uncertainty as a philosophical malady affecting not only contemporary theological reflection, but also knowledge at a much wider level, indeed, doubt about the validity of knowledge **as such**. Shortly after announcing the “Year of Faith,” Paul spoke on 7 April 1967 to the second assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, noting the presence of a certain “inexplicable ‘spirit of dizziness’” even among biblical scholars – an uncertainty regarding the capacity of human thought to reach objective reality.<sup>6</sup>

At an international congress at Rome’s ‘Angelicum’ (the Pontifical University of St. Thomas) celebrating the seventh centenary of the death of the ‘Angelic Doctor’, Pope Paul recalled on 20 April 1974 the supreme need for Aquinas’ sound realism in philosophy. He noted first the modern temptation toward superficiality in knowledge, that is, the tendency to neglect the discipline of metaphysical enquiry altogether and to remain content with obvious and immediate sensory experience:

We fear that the cognitive faculties of the new generation may find all too attractive the facile temptation to remain satisfied with knowledge of the sensory or phenomeno-scientific order, which is easily-attained and abundant, but exterior to the human spirit. These cognitive faculties will thereby become alienated from the serious and systematic effort to rise up to the higher principles of both knowledge and being.<sup>7</sup>

The Pope went on to stress the vital importance of this classical metaphysical discipline as a condition for a sound grasp of revealed truth and for its integration with natural knowledge. Of particular interest is the Pontiff’s acute observation in the following passage that the “supreme” insights of natural reason regarding being as such are also, paradoxically, its “fundamental” and “elementary” insights. As we have already noted in commenting on Gilson’s critique of Descartes, the deepest and soundest philosophy coincides with the principles of what ordinary people understand to be “common sense.” The Pope revealed his deep concern that a loss of this basic grasp of natural reality undermines the possibility of a reasoned assent to those divine realities which the Christian accepts by faith. He said:

What We fear is the lack of an authentic philosophy, adequate to the task of sustaining human thought today, both in its efforts toward coherent scientific progress and – more especially – in forming the mind for the perception of truth as such; a philosophy which is thus capable of imparting to man’s spirit that breadth and depth of view which is its proper destiny. In the absence of such a philosophy, there is a danger that the human spirit will fail to reach those supreme, yet fundamental and elementary, cognitions which can lead it on to attain this true destiny, and that it will also fail to grasp the initial but indispensable principles of that blessed knowledge which has as its object the world of divine things. On the other hand, We are certain that a correct, honest and rigorous exercise of philosophic thought predisposes the spirit to receive that supernatural message of divine light which we call the Catholic faith. It is the Lord who says it: “He who walks in the truth comes to the light” (Jn. 3: 21).<sup>8</sup>

The depth of feeling with which Paul VI held this conviction is shown by its prominence in one of the most somber and dramatic interventions of his pontificate: the famous homily on the Feast of SS. Peter and Paul, 29 June 1972, in which he decried the fact that the “smoke of Satan” had “entered the temple of God.” We have already quoted from this memorable declamation,<sup>9</sup> but it is worthwhile looking once again at certain key remarks, for they make manifest the Pontiff’s conviction that doubt about God and faith must be seen in the deeper metaphysical context of doubt about **any** knowable reality beyond appearances. He points out that science itself, which should be giving us truth, has become a source of general criticism and doubt:

<sup>6</sup> “. . . un inesplicabile ‘spirito di vertigine’ (Is. 19,14), anche fra coloro che conoscono e studiano la Parola di Dio: viene meno la certezza nella verità obbiettiva e nella capacità del pensiero umano di raggiungerla” (AAS 59 [1967] 408).

<sup>7</sup> “. . . noi temiamo che le facoltà conoscitiva della nuova generazione siano facilmente attratte e tentate a ritenersi soddisfatte dalla facilità e dall’affluenza delle cognizioni sensibili e fenomeno-scientifiche, cioè esteriori allo spirito umano, e distolte dallo sforzo sistematico ed impegnativo di risalire alle ragioni superiori sia del sapere, che del essere” (AAS 66 [1974] 267).

<sup>8</sup> “Temiamo una carenza della filosofia, autentica e idonea a sostenere oggi il pensiero umano sia nello sforzo scientifico coerente e progressivo, e sia specialmente nella formazione della mente alla percezione della verità in quanto tale, e capace quindi di dare allo spirito umano l’ampiezza e la profondità di vedute, a cui esso è pur destinato, con pericolo di non raggiungere quelle supreme, e pur fondamentali ed elementari cognizioni, che possono integrarlo al raggiungimento del suo vero destino, e alla felice scienza, indispensabile se pur iniziale, del mondo divino; mentre Noi siamo certi che un corretto, onesto, e severo esercizio del pensiero filosofico predisponga lo spirito ad accogliere anche quel messaggio soprannaturale di luce divina, che si chiama la fede; lo dice il Signore: qui facit veritatem venit ad lucem (Io. 3,21)” (*ibid.*).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Living Tradition*, no. 158, May 2012, p. 5.

Doubt has seeped into our consciousness; and it has entered by the very windows that should have been open to the light. From the sciences, which are developed in order to bring us truths which do not tear us away from God but encourage us to search for Him and celebrate Him with greater intensity, has come just the contrary: criticism and doubt. The scientists are the very ones who wrinkle their brows more ponderously and painfully than anyone else; and they end by teaching, “I do not know, we do not know, we **cannot** know.” The academy has become a seed-bed of confusion and of frequently absurd contradictions. . . . Even in the Church this state of confusion reigns.<sup>10</sup>

When certain scientists say that we cannot know reality beyond what is empirically observable, they are of course making a philosophical, not a scientific, statement. And since they are then stepping outside of their proper field of competence, it is not too surprising that the philosophy they give us is bad philosophy. But they would probably not be making such statements if they had not derived from Kant two notions: first, that all knowledge worthy of the name is that attained by the methods proper to empirical (natural) science; and secondly, that true knowledge, in consequence, cannot reach any reality which lies behind or beyond our sense-experience.

In a number of Wednesday general audiences Pope Paul returned to this theme of a generalized loss of confidence in the powers of the human intellect to grasp reality with certainty. At his audience of 14 June 1967, shortly after announcing the “Year of Faith,” the Pope used a telling image to describe the cognitive despair so prevalent today: just as a man with damaged eyes cannot find rest from the frustrating effort to see except in closing them to the light and accepting the darkness, so the skeptical mentality which prevails in today’s halls of learning produces a generation which can find no intellectual repose except in the abandonment of all certitude, and therefore of all religious faith. Many modern objections to the faith, he said,

derive from the *forma mentis*, that is, from that manner of using our cognitive faculties into which we are indoctrinated, almost unconsciously, by the academy, by science, by the modern mentality. And as always, new difficulties – fearfully radical ones today! – compound those of yesterday, calling everything in question. In the academic world today doubt encompasses everything, and therefore religion as well. It seems that the human mind finds no repose except in total negation, in the abandonment of any kind of certainty or faith whatever, just as one suffering from a malady of the eyes can find no repose except in obscurity and darkness. How could mere shadows be the goal of human thought, and of its unquenchable thirst for truth and for an encounter with the true and living God?<sup>11</sup>

Lamenting the decline of the ‘perennial philosophy’ on a similar occasion three years later (Wednesday, 20 May 1970), Paul VI went as far as to brand this systematic metaphysical doubt, which “seeks . . . in order **not** to find,” as an instance of that voluntary choice of darkness, rather than light, which is condemned in the solemn words of St. John’s Gospel: men are talking of the “death of God,” he says, in order to disguise their own willful blindness:

But today the truth is in crisis. Instead of that objective truth which gives us cognitive possession of reality, we are being offered a subjective version: experience, conscience, free personal opinion, or even a critique of our capacity to know and think validly at all. Philosophical truth is yielding to agnosticism, to skepticism, and to the ‘snobbery’ of systematic and negative doubt. One studies in order to demolish. One seeks in order **not** to find. One prefers the void. The Gospel warns us of this: “Men have preferred darkness to light.” And with the crisis of philosophic truth (Oh! Where have our sane rationality and our *philosophia perennis* vanished to?), religious truth

<sup>10</sup> “È entrato il dubbio nelle nostre coscienze, ed è entrato per finestre che invece dovevano essere aperte alla luce. Dalla scienza, che è fatta per darci delle verità che non distaccano da Dio ma ce lo fanno cercare ancora di più e celebrare con maggiore intensità, è venuta invece la critica, è venuto il dubbio. Gli scienziati sono coloro che più pensosamente e più dolorosamente curvano la fronte. E finiscono per insegnare: ‘Non so, non sappiamo, non possiamo sapere’. La scuola diventa palestra di confusione e di contraddizioni talvolta assurde. . . . Anche nella Chiesa regna questo stato di confusione” (Ins. 1972, 707).

<sup>11</sup> “. . . provengono dalla *forma mentis*, cioè dalla maniera di usare delle nostre facoltà conoscitive, alla quale la scuola, la scienza, la mentalità moderna, quasi a nostra insaputa, educano i nostri spiriti; e come sempre nuove difficoltà, oggi paurosamente radicali, che tutto mettono in questione, si aggiungono a quelle di ieri. Di tutto oggi si dubita nel mondo del pensiero, e perciò anche della religione; e pare che la mente dell’uomo non trovi riposo se non nella negazione totale, nell’abbandono di qualsiasi certezza, di qualsiasi fede, come colui che avendo gli occhi ammalati non ha riposo che all’oscuro, nel buio. Le tenebre sarebbero finalmente la meta del pensiero umano e della sua inestinguibile sete di verità e dell’incontro col Dio vivo e vero?” (Ins. 1967, 802).

has crumbled in the spirits of many today. They no longer know how to sustain the great and luminous affirmations of divine science, of natural theology – and much less those of the theology of revelation. Their eyes have become misty, then blind; and they have dared to label their own blindness the “death of God.”<sup>12</sup>

It is noteworthy that the Pope sees fit to describe this generalized skepticism as a form of “snobbery.” Once again he is clearly alluding to the fact that there is a certain affectation about this sort of philosophical current. Such theoretically universal doubt goes clean contrary to common sense, and nobody – not even its most ardent protagonists – can in practice live their lives in accord with a consistent application of its principles.

When objective certainty of reality is undermined, the shifting sands of individual, subjective experience take its place, as Pope Paul noted at the general audience of Wednesday, 30 August 1972, in which he stressed that this process inevitably entails decadence and confusion in the sphere of morality as well as speculative thought.<sup>13</sup> Reducing the problem to its simplest terms in another Wednesday allocution (4 October 1972), the Pope recalled yet again that the perennial philosophy is basically one of “common sense” – a ‘grass-roots’ wisdom which often goes by default today because the very effort to acquire it is considered too much trouble. Modern man, said the Pontiff, “is lacking in that sound, basic philosophical formation, which, even if limited to a ‘common-sense’ level which is accessible to everyone, is indispensable as the doorway to discussion in the realm of religion. . . . Once more We recall the exhortation of Pascal: we must make the effort to think well.”<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Correct Notions of Science and History

### 2a. The Danger of Naturalism in the Philosophy of Science

#### 2a.1. Post-Kantian Developments

If one side of the Kantian coin is its agnosticism about metaphysical reality, and therefore skepticism about God, the other side of the coin is its naturalism or “scientism”: that is, its tendency to assume or maintain that the only knowledge worthy of the name is that which is attainable by the methods of the natural or physical sciences. Skepticism and naturalism are simply two aspects of one and the same philosophical worldview; and the extent to which the abstruse Kantian philosophy has penetrated modern culture at a broad, popular level is made manifest in common linguistic usage. While in classical usage “science” meant certain knowledge (as distinct from guesswork or uncertain opinion) in any field of inquiry, the word has gradually become much more limited in its extension, so that today it tends to mean, for the most part, **natural** science – that which studies physical, measurable, causally-determined, sub-rational reality.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “Ma oggi la verità è in crisi. Alla verità oggettiva, che ci dà il possesso conoscitivo della realtà, si sostituisce quella soggettiva: l’esperienza, la coscienza, la libera opinione personale, quando non sia la critica della nostra capacità di conoscere, di pensare validamente. La verità filosofica cede all’agnosticismo, allo scetticismo, allo ‘snobismo’ del dubbio sistematico e negativo. Si studia, si cerca per demolire, per non trovare. Si preferisce il vuoto. Ce ne avverte il Vangelo: ‘Gli uomini hanno preferito le tenebre alla luce’. E con la crisi della verità filosofica (oh! dov’è svanita la nostra sana razionalità, la nostra philosophia perennis?) la verità religiosa è crollata in molti animi, che non hanno più saputo sostenere le grandi e solari affermazioni della scienza di Dio, della teologia naturale, e tanto meno quelle della teologia della rivelazione; gli occhi si sono annebbiati, poi accecati; e si è osato scambiare la propria cecità con la morte di Dio” (Ins. 1970, 520).

<sup>13</sup> “The phenomenon of weakness and moral decadence is aggravated by the critical condition of modern thought: having rebelled against the philosophical formulations of the past, it remains unsatisfied with those of our own time. Hence, the new generation, casting off so many forms of discipline, casts off also the rigorous discipline of thought, and indiscriminately replaces it by **experience**. This is a criterion of subjective truth, and as such it is unable to furnish solid principles for human conduct. Indeed experience, if left to its own devices, plays the role of tempter and accomplice, leading its devotees to many forms of deviation and degradation. (Il fenomeno della debolezza e della decadenza morale si aggrava per le condizioni critiche del pensiero moderno, ribelle alle formulazioni filosofiche del passato, e insoddisfatto di quello del nostro tempo; così la nuova generazione ripudia con tante altre anche la disciplina rigorosa del pensiero, e vi sostituisce, qualunque sia, l’esperienza, criterio superstito di verità soggettiva, per sé inetto a fornire solidi principii all’umana condotta, anzi tentatore e complice, se lasciato a se stesso, di tante deviazioni e degradazioni, a cui la guida della sola esperienza conduce)” (Ins. 1972, 844-845). One suspects that in this address the Pope had particularly in mind the outcry against his recent reaffirmation of the Church’s teaching against contraception in *Humanae Vitae*: many married Catholics were complaining that since their “experience” revealed this doctrine to be difficult or unpalatable, the doctrine must therefore be mistaken.

<sup>14</sup> “. . . manca di quella sana formazione filosofica sufficiente, la quale, anche se limitata a quel grado a tutti accessibile che si chiama il senso comune, è indispensabile per accedere al colloquio col mondo religioso. . . . Ancora una volta ricordiamo la esortazione di Pascal: dobbiamo fare lo sforzo di pensare bene” (Ins. 1972, 1018).

<sup>15</sup> The authoritative Shorter Oxford Dictionary (3rd. edn., 1944) gives as the first meanings of “science” the classical, **general** uses of the word (“the state or fact of knowing,” “a particular branch of knowledge or study”). It then notes that “in modern use” it “often” means “Natural and Physical Science.” The standard dictionary of American English, Webster’s (*Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield, U.S.A: 1967) begins its entry on “science” by saying “possession of knowledge often as distinguished from ignorance or misunderstanding.” The second meaning given is “a department of systematized knowledge as an object of study,” especially “one of the natural sciences.” The third is “knowledge covering general truths or the operation of general laws esp. as obtained and tested through scientific method: specif : NATURAL SCIENCE.” It is significant that in the

Our whole higher education system is based on a dichotomy which has become increasingly prominent since it was thrown into relief by the hermeneutical philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey: the dichotomy between “science,” in this restricted sense of the natural or positive sciences, and the “humanities” or “arts” (what Dilthey called *Geisteswissenschaften*). And in the popular Western mind an element of the broader classical sense of “science” (the element of objective certainty as opposed to subjective opinion) has become fused together with the more specialized modern usage to produce the widespread idea that natural science, with its tangible and measurable data and fixed laws, gives us the only kind of true, certain, and objective knowledge that is available to man. A kind of imperialism of the natural sciences has thus come to hold sway over the intellectual and educational leadership of what used to be Christendom, and this has not been without gravely harmful influence on Christian and Catholic scholarship as well.

As we saw, Paul VI referred to this danger in the preamble of the 1968 Profession of Faith, by insisting that man’s mind can reach true knowledge of reality “beyond that observable level which is the object of scientific interpretation.”<sup>16</sup> On numerous other occasions during his pontificate, as we shall see, the Pope repeated and expanded upon this danger arising from a false epistemology. The most obvious symptom of this error in the fields of theology and exegesis has been the attempt to retain traditional Christian language while changing its meaning. In the hope of arriving at a “deeper understanding” of the faith – one more adapted to the “scientific” outlook of modern man – many theologians and exegetes have in effect emptied certain dogmas and Scriptural passages of their authentic meaning, by eliminating all miraculous or supernatural elements. At the level of dogma this general hermeneutical approach was solemnly condemned by Vatican Council I in the following canon: “If anyone shall say that it can sometimes happen that, according to the progress of science, dogmas proposed by the Church need to be given a different sense from that which the Church has understood and understands, let him be *anathema*.”<sup>17</sup>

The same trend, however, with more specific application to biblical studies rather than dogma, became very influential in the decade following World War I, through the work of the German Protestant scholar Rudolf Bultmann, and others of his school. Bultmann’s radical reinterpretation of the New Testament owed a great deal to the existentialist philosophy of Martin Heidegger,<sup>18</sup> and manifested much of what has come to be known as historicism: the idea that all expressions of belief, all world-views, are so heavily conditioned by historical circumstances, and by the contingent cultural context in which they were formulated, that no absolute, trans-temporal, trans-cultural expression or evaluation of these ideas – valid in all times and places – is possible.<sup>19</sup> One can only try to “translate” the belief-expressions of an earlier historical epoch into “language” which is supposedly more intelligible for our own culture – but without pretending that this new expression will have any more absolute or permanent validity than the older one.

It seems clear, however, that the historicism of much biblical hermeneutical thought since Bultmann is itself rooted in the naturalism which has pervaded European intellectual leadership since Kant and the eighteenth-century “Enlightenment.” For the principal reason given by Bultmann as to why many biblical expressions of belief are said to be unintelligible to modern man, and hence in need of reinterpretation, is precisely that they are thought to embody a world-view alien to that of the modern natural sciences. The Bible asserts the existence and activity of preternatural beings (angels and devils), and records the occurrence of miraculous events (direct interventions of divine, supernatural power

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new and authoritative dictionary of Australian English (*The Macquarie Dictionary*, 2nd. edn., Sydney, 1991) the above order is reversed: the first meaning given is “the systematic study of man and his environment based on the deductions and inferences which can be made, and the general laws which can be formulated, from reproducible observations and measurements of events and parameters within the universe.” The second meaning given is “systematized knowledge in general.”

<sup>16</sup> “. . . *præter id quod observabile est, scientiarumque ope recognitus.*” (AAS 60 [1968] 435).

<sup>17</sup> “*Si quis dixerit, fieri posse, ut dogmatibus ab Ecclesia propositis aliquando secundum progressum scientiæ sensus tribuendus sit alius ab eo, quem intellexit et intellegit Ecclesia, anathema sit.*” (DS 3043). A similar insistence on the permanence of meaning in the Church’s expressions of faith is found in the Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiæ* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 24 June 1973. Citing the Vatican I definition which we have just referred to, the Declaration asserts: “There is no doubt, according to those conciliar texts, that when the Church declares the meaning of a dogma, that meaning is determined and irreformable (*Dubium non est quin, iuxta illos Concilii textus, sensus dogmatum, quem Ecclesia declarat, determinatus et irreformabilis sit*)” (AAS 65 [1973] 404).

<sup>18</sup> Two of Bultmann’s key works demonstrating this Heideggerian influence are (in recent English translations) his *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols., London: SCM, 1952) and *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1958). In these works, Jesus’ message of salvation is seen mainly in terms of a call to a life-changing “decision” giving rise to “authentic existence.” It is mainly the younger Heidegger whom Bultmann follows here – the Heidegger of *Being and Time* (London: SCM, and New York: Harper & Bros., 1962), which was originally published as *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Neomarius Verlag, 1927). A valuable study in English explaining this influence of Heidegger on Bultmann is J. Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (London: SCM, 1955).

<sup>19</sup> The term “historicism” is not univocal. As well being used in the above sense (historical relativism), the term has also been used for attempts to discover the “‘laws of development’ that govern the historical process and permit long-term social forecasts and predictions” (A. Flew *et al*, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* [London: Pan Books, 1979] 138). A clear, critical summary of the development of historicism in the first (relativist) sense can be found in E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967) 40ff. Hirsch traces the development of this idea from Herder through Dilthey to Heidegger.

with sense-perceptible effects on material bodies). But since such beings and events are not regularly observed in the course of nature, and cannot therefore form any part of a general system of natural laws describing worldly phenomena, they must, so it is said, be regarded as mythical.<sup>20</sup> But this conventional “scientific” world-view of modern secular scholarship is itself simply a derivative of the Kantian philosophical outlook which insists that the paradigm of all true knowledge available to the human mind is the ordered knowledge of regularly-occurring physical phenomena which is acquired by those methods employed in the natural sciences. All else is excluded dogmatically and *a priori* as unknowable, and therefore unbelievable, no matter how strong the supporting testimony may be.

## 2a.2. Major Interventions of Paul VI

From the early years of his pontificate onwards, Paul VI was aware of this danger of emptying the words and concepts of Catholic doctrine of their authentic and supernatural significance in the name of changed historical conditions, or the consciousness of modern scientific man. In his first Encyclical on a specific area of doctrine, *Mysterium fidei* (1965, on the Holy Eucharist), Pope Paul rebuked the disturbances to faith being caused by those who interpret defined doctrine “in such a way as to weaken the genuine and approved meaning of words and concepts.”<sup>21</sup> He went on to reject explicitly the idea that the philosophical terms used in the doctrinal formulations of past ecumenical councils were so culturally and historically conditioned as to be no longer suitable. On the contrary, the Pope insists, they are the universally valid and trans-cultural expressions of a *philosophia perennis*. Thus, while they can sometimes be better explained, the immutability of the faith requires that they never be expounded in a sense incompatible with the original meaning:

For by those formulas [used in Catholic eucharistic doctrine], as with the others which the Church uses for proposing the dogmas of faith, concepts are expressed which are not bound up with some specific human cultural situation, or with a certain stage of scientific progress, or to this or that theological school. Rather, they show forth what the human mind perceives by its universal and necessary experience, and expresses by apt and certain terms drawn at times from common speech and at times from refined language. These formulas, therefore, are well suited to all men of all times and places. To be sure, they are capable of clearer and more straightforward explanation – this, indeed, can be most fruitful. But such explanations of the Church’s formulas must always uphold the same sense in which she has used them, so that while one’s understanding of the faith advances, the truth of the faith remains immutable.<sup>22</sup>

In another major allocution during the “Year of Faith,” the inaugural address to the first meeting of the Synod of Bishops on 29 September 1967, Pope Paul admonished those writers who seek to change the accepted meaning of Catholic truths: often, he said, they were less concerned with obedience to the magisterium than with “accommodating the dogmas of faith to profane systems of thought and speech.”<sup>23</sup>

## 2a.3. Other Interventions of Paul VI

The Pope returned to this point in his personal magisterium on two less formal occasions. In an address to representatives of the Jesuit order on 21 April 1969 he warned against the influence of that “**naturalism** which is now very widespread,”<sup>24</sup> and on 14 June 1975 exhorted the staff of the Roman journal *La Civiltà Cattolica* to be on their guard against “a self-sufficient and rationalistic gnosis, which may present a dazzling appearance with its seductive sophisms, but which strives continually to empty the revealed dogmas of their content.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For a critical discussion of Bultmann’s position regarding demythologization, cf. John F. McCarthy, *The Science of Historical Theology* (Rockford, Illinois: TAN Books, 1991) 101-140.

<sup>21</sup> “. . . ut genuina verborum significatio seu probata conceptuum vis extenuetur” (AAS 57 [1965] 755).

<sup>22</sup> “*Formulis namque illis, sicut et ceteris quas ad dogmata fidei proponenda adhibet Ecclesia, conceptus exprimentur, qui non definitae cuidam humani cultus rationi, non cuidam certae scientiarum progressionis, non uni alterive theologorum scholae obligantur, sed id exhibent quod mens humana universali et necessaria experientia de rebus percipit et aptis certisque vocibus sive de vulgari sive de expolito sermone depromptis manifestat. Quapropter omnibus omnium temporum et locorum hominibus accommodatae sunt. Possunt quidem, quod fructuosissime contingit, clarius et apertius exponi, numquam tamen nisi eodem sensu quo adhibita sunt, ut proficiente fidei intelligentia maneat fidei immutabilis veritas*” (*ibid.*, 758).

<sup>23</sup> “. . . cupiunt fidei dogmata ad profana cogitandi loquendique rationes accommodare” (AAS 59 [1967] 965). Cf. also the quotations from two other Apostolic Exhortations over nn. 22 and 23 in *Living Tradition*, no. 158, May 2012, p.6.

<sup>24</sup> “. . . naturalismum, qui latissime nunc obtinet” (AAS 61 [1969] 319).

<sup>25</sup> “. . . una gnosi autosufficiente e razionalista, sia pure smagliante di seducenti sofismi, [che] tenta perennemente di svuotare del suo contenuto i



## 2b. The Danger of Relativism in the Philosophy of History

While the ‘historicist’ aspect of the naturalistic current we have been considering was not treated explicitly in the major pronouncements of Paul VI, he repeatedly warned against it on less solemn occasions. In a Christmas address to the College of Cardinals late in his pontificate (20 December 1976), Paul VI delivered a particularly sharp rebuke to this philosophical trend – the kind of hermeneutic which sees dogma as subject to perennial reinterpretation and reformulation. The idea of adapting the Good News to the mentality of differing cultural situations, he asserted, must not become a pretext for diluting the true and immutable meaning of Catholic doctrine:

It is clear that the immutability of the faith is endangered today by the relativism into which some authors have fallen. But in opposition to that attitude, We have firmly recalled that divine revelation is endowed with a precise, determined meaning and an immutable truth which is proposed for our belief by Christ, by the apostolic tradition, and by the acts of the Magisterium. We have also warned that no hermeneutic has the right to substitute for that meaning certain other meanings which are supposedly equivalent to it, even though partially opposed or drastically reduced. Such substitution cannot be justified in the name of adapting the Gospel to the mentalities of different historical eras and different environments.<sup>26</sup>

It was in certain of the Pope’s Wednesday general audiences that he expanded most fully on some of these errors which were briefly pointed out on more solemn occasions. As we have seen,<sup>27</sup> he attached no small importance to these talks, and prepared them carefully for the future instruction of all Catholic seekers of truth; so it will be worthwhile devoting careful attention to them. As the 1967-1968 “Year of Faith” drew to a close, and with the unresolved conflict over the ‘Dutch Catechism’ causing great worry, Paul VI in his general audience of 3 April 1968 singled out for severe criticism the false modesty of a reductionist historicism which redefines scholarship as the perpetual “search” for a truth which it declares can never actually be possessed. Coining the telling expression “chronolatry,” he inveighed against this tendency to see truth itself as being constantly “devoured” by the same progenitor – time itself – which brought it into being:

What is study, if not the search for truth – so multifarious, so beautiful, so marvellous? But what does the modern mentality, including the scientific mentality, say to you on this score? It tells you that truth is not immutable, that it is not definite, and not certain; so much so that the academy is defined more as a quest for truth than as the possession and conquest of truth. Indeed, everything changes, everything progresses, everything is transformed, human thought is characterized by its movement, its historical development, by the so-called historicism which is erected as a system to the point of presenting time itself as the force which both generates and devours those truths which the scholars, meanwhile, continue to teach. Our culture is dominated by “chronolatry,” with the result that nothing is certain any more, nothing is stable, nothing is worthy of being accepted and believed as a value which can be trusted for giving direction and meaning to one’s life.<sup>28</sup>

The Pope went on to note that this feature of secular culture has also invaded the field of religion, in which first the Church’s traditional terminology, and then the immutable teachings of Christ which it expresses, are discarded on the pretext of “updating” Catholicism:

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*dommi rivelati*” (AAS 67 [1975] 443).

<sup>26</sup> “Certo, l’immutabilità della fede è oggi messa in pericolo dal relativismo in cui alcuni autori sono caduti. Ma, in opposizione a tale atteggiamento, noi abbiamo fermamente ricordato che la rivelazione divina ha un senso preciso e determinato, un’immutabile verità, che ci è proposta da credere da parte di Cristo, della tradizione apostolica e degli atti del Magistero; e abbiamo ammonito che nessuna ermeneutica ha il diritto – per adattare la Buona Novella a mentalità che differiscono secondo le epoche e gli ambienti – di sostituire a questo significato altri pretesi significati equivalenti, benché parzialmente opposti, o funestamente ridotti” (AAS 69 [1977] 45).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Living Tradition*, no. 153, July 2011, pp. 10-11.

<sup>28</sup> “Che cosa è lo studio se non una ricerca di tante, belle e meravigliose verità? Ma che cosa vi dice, a questo proposito, la mentalità moderna, non esclusa quella scientifica? Vi dice che la verità non è immobile, non è definitiva, non è sicura; tanto che oggi si definisce la scuola piuttosto come una ricerca di verità, che non come possesso e conquista di verità. Infatti: tutto cambia, tutto progredisce, tutto si trasforma; il pensiero umano è caratterizzato dal suo movimento, dal suo procedimento storico, eretto a sistema fino a fare del tempo il generatore e il divoratore delle verità che la scuola viene, man mano, insegnando; la ‘cronolatria’ domina la cultura, con questo risultato, che nulla più è certo, nulla stabile, nulla degno di essere accettato e creduto come valore al quale si possa confidare la guida e il senso della vita” (Ins. 1968, 761).

In the attempt to express the Catholic religion in language more adapted to the contemporary mentality – that is, to “update” religious teaching – its inner reality, sad to say, is often subverted. The effort is made to render doctrine “understandable” by changing in the first instance those formulas in which the teaching Church has clothed and practically sealed that doctrine, in her concern to guard its identity jealously as it traverses the centuries. Then the very substance of the traditional doctrine is altered as it is subjected to the dominant law of that historicism by which all is transformed.<sup>29</sup>

We are told by the historicist theologians, however, that this “updated” version itself will not be in any way definitive, since the mentality of the next generation will have to remodel and reformulate it yet again. Thus, the Pope concludes, the teaching of Christ is reduced to the level of fallible human speculation:

The word of Christ is thus no longer the Truth, which remains unchanged, ever identical, equal to itself, always alive, always luminous, always fruitful, even if it often surpasses our rational comprehension. Rather, this word is reduced to a partial truth, like all the others which the mind measures and models within its own limits, as it paves the way for yet another expression of that truth in the subsequent generation – an expression based on private judgment which robs it of all objective and transcendent authority.<sup>30</sup>

In other addresses, Paul VI showed that he was well aware of the link between this historical relativism and the more fundamental Kantian error of making the method of the empirical sciences normative for the acquisition of knowledge in all spheres. If all rational knowledge is simply the organization of sense-data according to categories originating within the mind, then it follows that all such knowledge is merely tentative, hypothetical, and subject to continual reformulation as history brings forth new data and suggests ever new categories. The Pope therefore felt it necessary to recall, in an address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (18 April 1970), the warning issued by the Fathers of Vatican II: while the empirical methodology of natural science opens up great vistas of discovery regarding the physical universe, such science can also mistakenly elevate “its own proper research methods to being the supreme rule for the discovery of all truth.”<sup>31</sup> A similar warning was uttered at another Wednesday audience (14 May 1969), when the Pope rebuked the deformation of Christian truth which would occur “if we took it upon ourselves . . . to subordinate defined doctrine to the criteria of the profane sciences.”<sup>32</sup>

This destructive process of demythologization – altering the accepted meanings of Christian truths in the interests of a presumed progress in science – is certainly the target of Paul VI’s solemn magisterial summary of basic epistemological errors in the preamble to his 1968 Profession of Faith. The second sentence in this summary warned, as we saw, against the kind of hermeneutic which would “somehow alter the meaning” of a given text “according to free speculation.”<sup>33</sup>

### 3. Socio-Political Considerations

#### 3a, The Independence of Revealed Truth from Political Theory

<sup>29</sup> “Nel tentativo di dare alla religione cattolica un’espressione più conforme al linguaggio odierno e alla mentalità corrente, cioè di ‘aggiornare’ l’insegnamento religioso, spesso, purtroppo, se ne sovverte l’intima realtà, e si cerca di renderlo ‘comprensibile’ cambiandone dapprima le formule di cui la Chiesa-maestra lo ha rivestito e quasi sigillato per fargli varcare i secoli conservandone gelosamente l’identità, e alterando il contenuto stesso della dottrina tradizionale, sottoponendola alla legge dominante dello storicismo trasformatore” (ibid., 761-762).

<sup>30</sup> “La parola di Cristo così non è più la Verità, che non muta e che rimane sempre identica e pari a se stessa, sempre viva, sempre luminosa, sempre feconda, anche se spesso superiore alla nostra comprensione razionale; ma si riduce ad una verità parziale, come le altre che la mente misura e modella nei propri confini pronta, nella successiva generazione, a darle un’altra espressione, secondo un libero esame, che la spoglia d’ogni obiettiva e trascendente autorità” (ibid., 762).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. AAS 62 [1970] 289. The relevant passage of *Gaudium et Spes* 57 reads in full: “Today, in fact, the progress of the sciences and of technology – pursuits which cannot of themselves penetrate to the inner nature of things – can foster a certain phenomenism or agnosticism when the method of inquiry used in these disciplines is unduly elevated into the supreme rule for the discovery of all truth. Indeed, there is a danger that man, by trusting too much in modern discoveries, may come to see himself as self-sufficient, and seek no longer the things that are above. (*Sane hodiernus progressus scientiarum artiumque technicarum, quæ vi methodi suæ usque ad intimas rerum rationes penetrare nequeunt, cuidam phænomenismo et agnosticismo favere potest, quando methodus investigandi, qua disciplinæ istæ utuntur, immerito pro suprema totius veritatis inveniendæ regula habetur. Immo periculum adest, ne homo, inventis hodiernis nimis fidens, se sibi sufficere æstimet et altiora amplius iam non quærat*)” (AAS 58 [1966] 1078).

<sup>32</sup> “. . . se ci arrogassimo la licenza . . . d’una subordinazione della dottrina definita ai criteri delle scienze profane” (Ins. 1969, 957).

<sup>33</sup> “. . . sensum ad coniecturæ arbitratum quodammodo novare.” Cf. the last sentence (beginning “Moreover,”) in the citation over n. 2 to this essay.

Another fertile source of dissent from, and misinterpretation of, Catholic doctrine springs less from a false philosophy of science than from a false application of modern Western and liberal political thought to the field of religious and moral truth. Even here, however, there remains a definite link to the metaphysical skepticism which often accompanied the “democratic revolution” of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. For when all knowledge is reduced to tentative opinion or hypothesis at the speculative level, it seems to follow that in practice all theories, all opinions, should be permitted a wide and perhaps unlimited currency. When the academy is reduced, as Paul VI put it, to a “search for truth” in which no one may ever claim definitively to have **found** the truth, then what authority can ever have the right to suppress or limit the free spread and exchange of ideas? Speculative agnosticism about truth itself thus gives birth at the practical level to a radical pluralism, which, when imported into the Catholic Church, presents a serious challenge to the preservation of her doctrine, including her right and duty to interpret the Scriptures authentically.<sup>34</sup>

### 3a.1. Major Intervention

The most authoritative intervention in which he made this point was delivered on the occasion of the inaugural gathering of the Synod of Bishops, less than two years after the Council’s conclusion (29 September 1967). He stressed above all the supernatural origin of the gift of faith:

Faith, as we well know, does not find its origin in some arbitrary interpretation of the divine word or in purely natural considerations. Nor is it just the expression of a religious sense arising from the majority opinion – bereft of any legitimate judge – among those who profess to believe in God. Much less is it the assent given to the fleeting philosophical and sociological views of a certain determinate era.<sup>35</sup>

On the contrary, faith is a total adhesion of “our entire spiritual nature” to the message of salvation. In contrast to the fickle and changing opinions of this or that group, it is “not merely an inquiry,” but above all, “certitude”:

Rather, faith . . . is an adhesion by which our entire spiritual nature accepts that marvelous and merciful message of salvation which reaches us as if by clear and secret channels of revelation. Faith is not merely an inquiry; it is above all certitude. Rather than the fruit of our own investigations, it is a certain hidden gift which asks that we offer ourselves with readiness and docility for that sublime colloquy which God initiates with attentive and fully trusting souls.<sup>36</sup>

### 3a.2. Other Interventions

Once again, it is to the Pope’s Wednesday audiences that we must turn for a more ample development of this topic. It was a particularly insistent and recurring theme of his talks in the years immediately following the disputes over *De Nieuwe Katechismus* (the “Dutch Catechism”) and the unprecedented tempest of dissent which greeted the publication

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<sup>34</sup> Symptomatic of the intrusion into theology of these socio-political assumptions, complete with their historical relativism and their strong distaste for the idea of any authority whose right to command does not issue from the will of those who receive the commands, is the following frank affirmation of then-Father Avery Dulles (1918-2008), penned during his earlier and more theologically liberal phase. Prior to his return to a more rigorously orthodox approach, and thirty years before his elevation to the College of Cardinals, the American Jesuit scholar wrote: “The times call for an ‘epochal’ reinterpretation of the very notion of ‘magisterium’ . . . Contemporary techniques of government, teaching and communications would seem to harmonize at least as well with the demands of the gospel as do the feudal and absolutist patterns of the past. . . . Even in our own day, some theologians continue to insist on the immutability of the concepts and terms employed in dogmatic formulations” (*The Survival of Dogma*, [New York: Doubleday, 1971] 114, 117-118). It is significant, perhaps, that Dulles was the son of a former Secretary of State of the U.S.A. – a land where democracy and religion have probably enjoyed a closer association, in both public philosophy and popular culture, than in any other country. In their special synod held with Pope John Paul II in Rome in March 1989, the Archbishops of the U.S.A. stressed the fact that in their own culture, the idea of any authority which is not seen as ‘democratic’ is automatically viewed with suspicion, and that this presents pastoral difficulties in announcing the Catholic understanding of the Gospel in America. As we have seen (cf. above, over n. 29), Paul VI himself would have to be included among those “theologians” whom Dulles criticized in 1971 for “continu[ing] to insist on the immutability” of basic doctrinal formulations. And the Pope repeatedly had occasion to denounce the false hermeneutic which sees ‘public opinion’ as an authentic key to religious and moral truth.

<sup>35</sup> “*Fides, ut probe novimus, non a verbi divini interpretatione arbitrio vel solum secundum naturæ rationes facta, originem trahit, neque est significatio sensus religiosi, quæ oriatur ex opinione, legitimo moderatore destituta, plurium hominum qui se in Deum credere affirmant, ac multo minus est assensio, quæ sententiis philosophicis et sociologicis certo quodam tempore eoque fugaci vigentibus, præstetur*” (AAS 59 [1967] 966).

<sup>36</sup> “*Fides vero . . . est adhesio, qua tota natura spiritualis nostra mirabile illud ac misericors nuntium salutis accipit, quod quasi per lucidas et secretas vias Revelationis ad nos pervenit. Fides non solum est inquisitio, sed imprimis certitudo; potius quam nostræ pervestigationis fructus, est donum quoddam arcanum, quod postulat, ut nosmetipsos dociles ac paratos præbeamus ad eximium illud colloquium, quod Deus cum animis nostris intendit ac fiduciæ plenius instituit*” (*ibid.*).

of *Humanae Vitae*. This was the very time when, according to Jean Guittou's testimony,<sup>37</sup> Pope Paul began to express in private his belief that the Church was now experiencing the most severe internal upheaval in her long history.

Even before the storm had reached its full force, the Pope felt it opportune to recall his predecessor St. Pius X's insistence that popular or scholarly opinion among the faithful is not a datum which can override or compel the Church's teaching authority. This was at a general audience at the commencement of the 1967-1968 "Year of Faith" (5 July 1967):

You see: the Apostle is a real teacher. He is not simply the echo of the religious consciousness of the community; he is not just acting as a spokesman giving precise expression and legitimacy to the opinion of the faithful, as the modernists used to claim (cf. *Denz.-Schoen.* 3406 [200]), and as some theologians still dare to affirm today. The voice of the Apostle generates faith; and just as it brings the first proclamation of the Gospel, so also it defends the Gospel's true meaning, defines its interpretation, guides its reception by the faithful, and denounces the errors of those who deform it.<sup>38</sup>

Two years later, in the same Wednesday audience allocation (14 May 1969) wherein he rebuked the tendency to subordinate defined doctrine to the criteria of profane science,<sup>39</sup> the Pope added that much less can it be subordinated to "the fashions of public opinion, to the tastes and deviations – so obvious in our time – of the speculative and practical mentality of current literature."<sup>40</sup>

Opinion polls, the Pope declared at another general audience not long afterwards (3 December 1969), do not constitute a reliable source of moral truth.<sup>41</sup> Six months after the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, when the full extent of the dissent from the encyclical was painfully clear, he delivered a particularly strong denunciation of the misuse of sociology (29 January 1969). He noted with concern that in the current wave of insubordination and secularization in the Church, more credit is often given to sociological arguments than to theological and spiritual ones. Is this a mere "crisis of growth"? Perhaps, answers Pope Paul, but it also bespeaks a crisis of faith:

Why so much insubordination? Why such decadence in regard to canonical norms, such audacity in hypothesizing transformations in Church structures, such insistence on assimilating Catholic life to secular life-styles, such awed respect before sociological considerations rather than theological and spiritual ones? It's a crisis of growth, many say – and so it may be. But is it not also a crisis of faith? A crisis of confidence in the Church on the part of some of her own children?<sup>42</sup>

This mentality, the Pope continued, can be particularly destructive when it affects even Church authorities. He calls to mind the frequent accusation that some prelates are allowing error and disorder to go unchallenged; and by not criticizing or rebutting this accusation, suggests clearly that at times it is well-founded. That is, some Church leaders may indeed be too much swayed by the prospect of adverse public opinion:

There are those who, on examining this alarming phenomenon, speak of a state of debilitating, systematic doubt in the rank-and-file clergy and laity. Some are speaking of lack of formation, timidity, laziness. Some even charge the ecclesiastical authority and the community of good Catholics with fearfulness, when they both allow certain

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Living Tradition*, no. 158, May 2012, pp. 1-2.

<sup>38</sup> "Vedete: l'Apostolo è maestro; non è semplicemente l'eco della coscienza religiosa della comunità; non è l'espressione dell'opinione dei fedeli, quasi la voce che la precisa e la legalizza, come dicevano i modernisti (cf. *Denz.-Schoen.* 3406 [200]), e come ancora oggi alcuni teologi osano affermare. La voce dell'Apostolo è generatrice della fede; come essa apporta il primo annuncio del Vangelo, così ne difende il senso genuino, ne definisce l'interpretazione, ne guida l'accoglienza dei fedeli, ne denuncia le erronee deformazioni" (*Ins.* 1967, 821). The passage in Denzinger referred to here by Paul VI is the following condemned proposition found in *Lamentabili*: "In defining truths the learning Church and the teaching Church collaborate in such a way that nothing remains for the teaching Church to do except ratify the common opinions of the learning Church. (*In definiendis veritatibus ita collaborant discens et docens Ecclesia, ut docentes Ecclesiae nihil supersit, nisi communes discantis opiniones sancire*)" (*DS* 3406).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. above, section 2(b), n. 32.

<sup>40</sup> "[la] moda dell'opinione pubblica, ai gusti e alle deviazioni (oggi tanto pronunciate) della mentalità speculativa e pratica della letteratura corrente . . ." (*Ins.* 1969, 957).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Ins.* 1969, 1141.

<sup>42</sup> "Perché tante insubordinazioni, tanto decadimento della norma canonica, tanti tentativi di secolarizzazione, tanta audacia nell'ipotizzare trasformazioni di strutture ecclesiali, tanta voglia di assimilare la vita cattolica a quella profana, tanto credito alle considerazioni sociologiche in luogo di quelle teologiche e spirituali? Crisi di crescita, si dice da molti; e sia. Ma non è anche crisi di fede? Crisi di fiducia di alcuni figli della Chiesa nella Chiesa stessa?" (*Ins.* 1969, 861).

currents of manifest disorder within our camp to prevail, without warning, without correcting, without reacting, and when they yield, almost as if through an inferiority complex, to the sovereignty claimed by public opinion, through the instrumentality of the powerful mass-media. . . .<sup>43</sup>

### 3b. True and False Pluralism

In another general audience in the following year (20 May 1970), Paul VI made a point of explicitly rejecting a ‘democratic’ and ‘pluralistic’ approach to the interpretation of Christian truth. The rebellion begins, says the Pope,

under the pretext of pluralism, in which it is agreed to study the inexhaustible riches of divine truth and express them with a different vocabulary and according to different mentalities. But in fact what these advocates of pluralism want to do is legitimize ambiguous and uncertain expressions of the faith – a faith which they refrain from affirming on the excuse that they are just doing research. They ask the opinion of the faithful as to what they want to believe, attributing to them a questionable charism of competence and experience. This leaves the truth of faith to the tender mercies of those arbiters whose ideas are the wildest, or whose voices are the loudest. All this takes place when due submission is lacking to the Magisterium of the Church, through which the Lord has willed to protect the truths of the faith.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, one Wednesday audience allocution is of particular interest from this point of view – Pope Paul’s discourse of 28 August 1974, which he devoted to the difference between true and false “pluralism.” This word denotes something “very beautiful” (*molto bello*), said the Pope, when it refers to the rich variety of forms in which the **one faith** has been expressed and developed throughout the ages, ranging from the primitive apostolic preaching to the creeds and great medieval and modern syntheses – not to mention the Church’s wealth of liturgical expressions. Pluralism in this positive sense

refers to the fruitfulness of our Catholic doctrine, which, while maintaining a deep and genuine identity of content – that is, continuing to adhere strictly to its own univocal reality, to the *una fides* . . . – possesses an enormous wealth of expression for every language (remember, for instance, the miracle of tongues on the Day of Pentecost), for every period of history [here a footnote refers to Bl. John Henry Newman’s *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*] for every age and condition of human life (cf. the *kerygma*, or primitive preaching, the *didaché* or apostolic teaching, the first *symbols* of faith, that is, doctrinal syntheses used as *rules* of faith under the name of *creeds*, and then *catechisms* and all kinds of doctrinal works such as the mediæval *summas* of theology, and the more recent works giving a more ample and systematic exposition of Catholic dogma). Nor can We fail to mention the manifold voices of the Liturgy, lingering in our ears, as it were, and vying with all these doctrinal expressions, so as to manifest the well-known equation between the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi*.<sup>45</sup>

This healthy and fruitful pluralism, however, the Pontiff contrasted with another kind which, even when espoused by professing Catholics, is essentially the same error as that Protestant “private judgment” which rejects the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. It quickly becomes an individualism and subjectivism which disintegrates doctrine, replacing the

<sup>43</sup> “Vi è chi, scrutando questo allarmante fenomeno, parla d’uno stato d’animo di dubbio sistematico e debilitante in mezzo alle file del Clero e dei Fedeli; e chi parla di impreparazione, di timidezza, di pigrizia; e chi addirittura accusa di paura sia l’autorità ecclesiastica, che la comunità dei buoni, quando l’una e l’altra lasciano prevalere, senza ammonire, senza rettificare, senza reagire, certe correnti di manifesto disordine nel campo nostro, e cedono, quasi per un complesso d’inferiorità, al dominio affermato nell’opinione pubblica, mediante poderosi mezzi di comunicazione sociali. . .” (*ibid.*).

<sup>44</sup> “. . . col pretesto del pluralismo, che consente di studiare le inesauribili ricchezze delle verità divine e di esprimerle in diversità di linguaggio e di mentalità, vorrebbero legittimare espressioni ambigue ed incerte della fede, accontentarsi della sua ricerca per sottrarsi alla sua affermazione, domandare all’opinione dei fedeli che cosa vogliono credere, attribuendo loro un discutibile carisma di competenza e di esperienza, che mette la verità della fede a repentaglio degli arbitri più strani e più volubili. Tutto questo avviene quando non si presta l’ossequio al magistero della Chiesa, con cui il Signore ha voluto proteggere la verità della fede” (*Ins.* 1970, 520-521).

<sup>45</sup> “. . . si riferisce alla fecondità della nostra dottrina cattolica, la quale, conservando una sincera e profonda identità di contenuto e rimanendo cioè strettamente aderente alla propria univoca realtà, all’*una fides*, . . . possiede una enorme ricchezza di espressioni, per ogni lingua (ricordiamo, ad esempio, il miracolo delle lingue nel giorno della Pentecoste), per ogni periodo della storia, per ogni età e grado della vita umana (cfr. il *kerygma*, o annuncio primitivo, la *didaché*, o dottrina apostolica, i primi simboli, ossia le sintesi dottrinali, come regole della dottrina, che presero il nome di credo, e poi i catechismi e le opere dottrinali d’ogni forma, come le *summe* teologiche medioevali, e le opere più recenti di più ampia e sistematica esposizione del dogma cattolico); e non possiamo omettere le molte e quasi aleggianti voci della liturgia, che gareggiano con quelle dottrinali, tanto da offrire la nota equazione fra la *lex orandi* e la *lex credendi*; . . .” (*Ins.* 1974, 764-765).

symphony of Pentecost by the cacophony of Babel. This “pluralism” of mutually incompatible and warring opinions, said the Pope, comes from:

individual interpretation, indefinitely centrifugal and pluralistic, that is, the “private judgment” which has pulverized the unity of the faith into an innumerable multiplicity of personal opinions, arbitrarily or ineffectively kept in check by a “regulated norm,”<sup>46</sup> that is, by an obligatory interpretation emanating from the community, but which is then itself superseded by subjective interpretations which the Holy Spirit supposedly suggests directly to each soul. Thus it is that “the Protestant doctrine of private judgment, or of the sole authority of the Holy Spirit as the interpreter of Scripture, opens the way to the most radical philosophical and theological subjectivism.” Are we thus to turn back from the unifying and festive symphony of Pentecost to the old and mysterious “confusion of tongues” reported in the Bible? What ecumenism could there be without unity of faith? Where would Christianity finish (not to mention **Catholic** Christianity!) if we accepted today as legitimate the doctrinal – and therefore ecclesial – disintegration which comes under the guise of a specious but inadmissible pluralism?<sup>47</sup>

We have seen in this essay how Paul VI insisted on several fundamental points belonging to (or deriving from) the ‘perennial philosophy’ of the Thomistic tradition. These are norms which the Pope reaffirmed as basic for gaining and communicating true knowledge in general (including, therefore, the saving knowledge communicated in the Scriptures): the capacity of the mind to overcome skepticism and to know objective reality, not just the appearances thereof; the fact that the knowledge of sense-perceptible, measurable objects which is proper to the natural sciences is not the **only** true knowledge; the fact that time and the unfolding of history neither relativize truth itself nor render it incommunicable across the centuries and across differing cultures; and the fact that religious and ethical truth cannot be determined by current socio-political categories such as democracy (‘the will/opinion of the majority’) or by the kind of ‘pluralism’ which attributes equal value or respectability to contradictory opinions, even on fundamental issues. One more aspect of Pope Paul VI’s teaching in the field of philosophy now needs to be considered: that regarding modern hermeneutics. Since this is both more specific in scope, and more directly related to the theme of biblical interpretation, it merits a separate *Living Tradition* article.

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<sup>46</sup> “norma regolata.” The implied reference would be a contrast with the “norma regolante” (“regulating norm”) which in Protestant theology is the Bible alone. Creeds are seen as a “regulated norm” in the sense that they in turn depend on “sola Scriptura.”

<sup>47</sup> “. . . l’interpretazione individuale, indefinitamente centrifuga e pluralistica, cioè a quel ‘libero esame’ che ha polverizzato l’unità della fede nell’innumerevole molteplicità di opinioni personali, indarno, o arbitrariamente, contenuta da una ‘norma regolata’, cioè da un’interpretazione obbligatoria emanata dalla comunità, superata poi anch’essa dall’ispirazione soggettiva, che lo Spirito Santo suggerirebbe all’anima, direttamente. Così che ‘la dottrina protestante del libero esame, o dell’unica autorità dello Spirito Santo, quale autentico interprete della Scrittura, apre la via al più radicale soggettivismo filosofico-religioso’. Dalla plurisinfronia unificante e celebrante della Pentecoste si dovrebbe retrocedere alla ‘confusione delle lingue’, di cui la Bibbia ci riporta la misteriosa vicenda? Quale ecumenismo potremmo ricomporre senza l’unità della fede? Dove finirebbe il cristianesimo, dove ancor più il cattolicesimo, se ancor oggi, sotto uno specioso, ma inammissibile pluralismo, si accettasse come legittima la disgregazione dottrinale, e quindi anche ecclesiale, ch’esso può recare con sé?” (ibid., 766).