

THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF INTERDICT:  
SOME MORE WARNINGS FROM HISTORY

Marshall Crossnoe

I would like to begin with a claim that I have heard or read in one form or another for almost thirty years. The claim is this: “Church history teaches that whenever Christian thinkers baptize philosophy, they compromise the Christian faith.” That claim is the church historian’s version of St. Paul’s warning, “see to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy.” It is the church historian’s answer to Tertullian’s famous rhetorical question, “What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?” It is a “history of doctrine take” on the perennial conflict between faith and reason, a take that Adolph Harnack exploited to great and lasting effect in *History of Doctrine*, and the one that Etienne Gilson challenged in his famous little book entitled *Faith and Reason*.

The claim reminds me of interdict. Interdict is the censure that bishops of Rome have been using since the ninth century.<sup>1</sup> By means of interdict, popes interrupt participation in holy things. It typically takes the form of denying someone or some group access to the Divine Liturgy, the sacraments, Christian burial, or other means of grace. The claim regarding what church history teaches is a call to interdict philosophy. If church history teaches that whenever Christian thinkers baptize philosophy, they compromise the Christian faith, then we should have nothing to do with philosophy. We should withhold baptism from it.

I do not believe that is a good idea. The interdiction of philosophy is a double-edged sword. It can, and in the past it has, cut both ways. We can protect theological investigation from contamination or compromise by prohibiting the use of philosophical tools of enquiry in

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<sup>1</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1917), s. v., “interdict,” [www.newadvent.org/cathen/08073a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08073a.htm).

theological investigation. But such prohibition can also insulate theological investigation from constructive and creative engagement.

## **I. Paris in the Thirteenth Century**

An instructive instance of such constructive and creative engagement occurred at the University of Paris during the thirteenth century. Several generations of academic theologians directed a bright season of theological and philosophical interplay, one in which philosophy served holy doctrine (*sacra doctrina*). Furthermore, during that same bright season others were busy trying to quarantine the faith from philosophical contamination. Between approximately 1190 and 1330, a handful of Parisian masters put Aristotle to work productively as a handmaiden to theology just when others sought to place Aristotle under interdict. The convergence of both treatments of philosophy by theology has something to teach us.

### **A. Philosophy Baptized**

Three related trajectories of theological and philosophical interplay animated the arts and theology faculties at Paris during the thirteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Alexander of Hales († c. 1245) led the first of the trajectories. In his theological *Summa*, which was compiled before 1245, Alexander posed the question, “Is theology a science?” He was probably the first academic theologian to ask that question, and he answered it in the negative. “Theology is not a science,” Alexander wrote. “It is a ‘wisdom.’” It is a habit or virtue of knowledge, and it is different from the habit or virtue of knowledge called science. Alexander and his contemporaries had received a particular understanding of science (*scientia*) from Aristotle and Boethius, and understanding that assumes science is the apprehension and articulation of universal truths by means of demonstration. By contrast, according to Alexander, Holy Doctrine seeks salvation, and it does so by apprehension

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<sup>2</sup> M.-D. Chenu’s *La théologie comme science au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Paris, 1957; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Paris, 1942) is the classic study of this attempt to understand theology as a science. Also see Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Eugene, OR, 2001; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Philadelphia, 1983).

and articulation of revealed truths and particular, historical truths. The means and ends of these two ways of knowing are different. Because the revealed and historical truths that theology treats are alluded to or found in Holy Scripture, the primary method of theology is not demonstration. Instead, theology employs the methods of textual analysis. As Alexander saw it, treat metaphors and imagery; they trace narratives, and use other strategies that are essentially literary.

At about the same time, other Parisian theologians were pursuing a related, but slightly different line of enquiry. This second trajectory eventually moved the discussion about whether or not theology was a science to another level. William of Auxerre († 1223) initiated the second trajectory by thinking like one of Alexander's theologians, that is, by proposing an analogy. In his *Sentences* commentary, which might be the earliest *Sentences* commentary ever produced, William suggested that the articles of the Christian faith function in theology just as first principles function in philosophy. He was probably the first to propose this analogy. Where Alexander and his followers answered, "No, theology is not a science; it is something completely different," William and his followers answered, "Yes, there is one way we can consider theology to be a science, and that is by taking 'science' to mean the way of thinking that moves from first principles to conclusions by accepted rational means."

Thomas Aquinas († 1274) is the best-known theologian who embraced William of Auxerre's analogy. Aquinas exploited the full explanatory power of the analogy, and in doing so advanced understanding of the process of theological thinking. He acknowledged the necessity of revelation and its operation in theological thinking, which was a standard approach that went all the way back to Augustine. For Aquinas as for Augustine, the articles of the Christian faith are revealed, and they correspond to a "revelatory receptivity" in human beings. As revealed, these articles become the first principles of the faith. But Aquinas advanced the discussion by suggesting that this mode of knowing makes room for questions. He combined Augustine's view of revealed knowledge with William of Auxerre's analogy to science and produced a compelling

definition and justification of the Parisian theological project. Because revealed articles of the faith could be reasoned from like first principles, active reflection on collections of articles of the faith such as Peter Lombard's *Sentences* could generate further truths, derivative truths, new truths. And so students of theology in universities across Europe composed commentaries on Lombard's *Sentences* for the next 500 years.

The conception of science as a body of truths or conclusions derived from first principles by means of demonstration is a philosophical conception. Alexander of Hales and company said that theology is not ordered according to that conception, but William of Auxerre and Thomas Aquinas and others said it is. The operative difference is that members of the second group believed theology and philosophy started from different principles, and that they ended at different propositions. *Summas*, *Sentences* commentaries, and collections of *quodlibetal* and other disputed questions produced around 1250 reveal Parisian theologians sorting out the vagaries and contradictions attendant on the claim that theology is a way of knowing that is similar in some important ways to the philosophical way of knowing called science.

A third and related trajectory also opened up at mid-century. Contemporaries of the younger Aquinas, or perhaps a few theologians who immediately preceded him, began to ask the next logical question. Some of those who accepted the analogy between theological knowing and the knowing of science accepted the related distinction between types of knowing, and then explored the distinction's implications for theology. *Summas*, *Sentences* commentaries, and collections of questions produced at Paris between 1250 and 1330 contain the question, "What kind of science is theology?" And the answers they give to this question are philosophical answers.

The range of possible answers to the question "What kind of science is theology?" was never very wide. The number of possible answers was limited from the very beginning, and it was

limited for philosophical reasons. Theology was either speculative or practical. The ancient Greek division of knowledge into theory and praxis ruled the thirteenth-century investigations. Masters and scholars at Paris during the third and fourth quarters of the century opted for one or the other of the two positions. Some answered that theology is a speculative science, because its highest occupation is contemplation of God alone. It seeks no other object but knowledge of the divine. Others argued that theology is practical, because its end is practice. It is an intellectual habit intended to change the theologian's behavior. Thomas Aquinas is the leading figure of a group who sought a middle position by answering that theology is both speculative and practical. Of course, Aquinas leaned to the speculative side; he wrote that theology as speculative is the more noble endeavor, for as such it is concerned with divine truth.

The ancient philosophical division of knowledge helped thirteenth-century theologians at Paris to understand their own academic discipline, and their use of that division opened up new possibilities. Franciscan theology masters following Bonaventure († 1274) offered a third answer, one that bypassed the dominant binary of theory and praxis. They argued that theology is neither speculative nor practical, but affective. It is a way of knowing that transforms the desires, that restructures and redirects the affective life of human beings. I am working on a manuscript of a Victorine master from the early fourteenth century who posed the question this way: "Is theology speculative, practical, or affective?" He answered that it is speculative, but his articulation of the question and his summary treatment of all three possible answers are instructive. They testify to the way in which the original binary approach to the question, which was thoroughly philosophical, opened up a third option that produced theological insight.

## **B. Philosophy Interdicted**

At the same time that academic theologians were following these three fruitful trajectories of philosophical theologizing, others at Paris were attempting to interdict philosophy. In 1210, a

church council forbade the public or private reading of Aristotle's natural philosophy and commentaries on it.<sup>3</sup> In 1215, papal legate Robert de Courçon issued a series of statutes for the University of Paris that renewed the earlier prohibition.<sup>4</sup> The statutes specified the minimum age and training requirements for university masters. They also specified the style and color of robes that masters could wear when teaching, and they prohibited masters from wearing fancy shoes under their robes. More important for our concerns, the 1215 statutes directly addressed the issue of teaching philosophy. They specified a list of treatises on logic by Porphyry, Aristotle, and Boethius that could be taught by members of the arts faculty. Only senior regent masters could teach these texts, and only during what were called "regular lectures." Non-regents and advanced students were not allowed to lecture on the logical treatises in the informal afternoon sessions called "extraordinary lectures." Moreover, the regents could only teach the logical works. The *Metaphysics* and the treatises on natural philosophy were explicitly proscribed. They were not to be taught or read, and anyone found doing so had fifteen days to publicly and permanently correct his ways. If he did not, excommunication procedures were started. Aristotle's metaphysics and natural philosophy were effectively placed under interdict.

The story did not end in 1215. Perhaps as few as two decades later, university masters at Paris were lecturing on the very works of Aristotle that the 1215 statutes prohibited. We have known for some time that the statutes did not regulate university practice for very long. Another document issued in 1255 makes that clear.<sup>5</sup> Evidently, at some point after 1215, Courçon's statutes were either officially rescinded, or they were unofficially ignored. The 1255 document

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<sup>3</sup> The authoritative Latin edition of this university document (and those considered below) is the *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, eds. H. Denifle and E. Chatelain (Paris, 1889 – 1897); hereafter abbreviated *CUP*. The 1210 prohibition is edited in *CUP*, vol. 1, p. 70; an English translation is available in Edward Grant, *A Source Book in Medieval Science* (Cambridge, MA, 1974), p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> *CUP*, vol. 1, p. 78; an English translation is available at [www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/courcon1.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/courcon1.html).

<sup>5</sup> *CUP*, vol. 1, p. 277 – 278; English trans: Grant, *A Source Book*, pp. 43 – 4. Also see Jacques Verger, *Les universités au moyen âge* (Paris, 1973), pp. 94 – 95.

lists the texts that were taught in the arts and philosophy faculties, and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *Physics*, and other works of natural philosophy are on the list. A number of scholars around the world are currently working on this development, and they have made some interesting discoveries. They are filling in the gaps between 1215 and 1255. We now know, for example, that an anonymous master in the arts faculty lectured on Aristotle's *Concerning the Soul* at Paris during the mid 1240s.<sup>6</sup> Rega Wood is single-handedly rewriting the history of natural philosophy at Paris, arguing from strong manuscript evidence that masters were lecturing on Aristotle's *Physics* by 1231.<sup>7</sup>

What accounts for this change? Was the 1210/1215 interdiction of Aristotle officially lifted? If so, why? The jury is still out on these questions, and several possible answers are being debated. Comparing the 1210 prohibition and the 1215 statutes, scholars have noted that the latter tacitly permitted private reading of the works that had been prohibited. A papal decree of 1231 allowed the prohibited works to be corrected by a committee of scholars.<sup>8</sup> So there was movement, but a full and compelling explanation of the movement is still pending. It will doubtless include the fact that a new generation of masters and students was at work during the 1230s, a new generation of younger theologians who had better access to and thus better understanding of Aristotle. All of Aristotle's works were recovered and reconstructed by mid-century, so more of Aristotle's writings were available in more complete and more accurate editions than ever before. That means the younger theologians were in a position to understand Aristotle better than their predecessors. The fact that they moved beyond the earlier prohibitions and statutes makes sense in that context.

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<sup>6</sup> See Robert Pasnau's description of "Anonymous (Arts Master), *Sententia super II et III De Anima* (Paris?, c. 1246 – 1247," available at <http://spot.colorado.edu/~pasnau/research/danotes.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Rega Wood, *Richard Rufus of Cornwall. In Physicam Aristotelis. Britannici Medii Aevi XVI* (Oxford, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> *CUP*, vol. 1, p. 543 – 544; English trans: Grant, *A Source Book*, pp. 45 – 50.

Others reasserted prohibitions of philosophy near the end of the thirteenth century. In 1270, the bishop of Paris Etienne Tempier published a condemnation of thirteen radical Aristotelian teachings attributed to Averroes († 1198). Seven years later, in 1277, he published a list of 219 propositions that were not to be taught at the university, under the same possible penalties as in 1210/1215.<sup>9</sup> Most of the 219 prohibited propositions, or “errors” as they were called, were claims about natural philosophy taken from Aristotle. Teaching about the eternity of the world, the unicity of the intellect, the possibility of rectilinear motion in space, and other philosophical ideas were prohibited on pain of excommunication.

The story of the 1277 prohibitions is well known, and one assessment of its effects is famous and controversial, at least among historians of medieval science. Pierre Duhem argued that the masters at Paris who were prohibited from teaching Aristotle entertained other explanations of natural and physical phenomena, and thus were precursors of the Scientific Revolution.<sup>10</sup> Duhem celebrated those early fourteenth-century masters who could no longer teach what Aristotle taught about the movement of bodies in space, and the space that they moved in, because of the prohibitions. Instead, they began to entertain possibilities of rectilinear motion and empty space, possibilities that paved the way for modern physics and astronomy.

This “Duhem thesis” has been roundly debated, and most now agree that it was exaggerated.<sup>11</sup> It is too much of an historical stretch to claim that the prohibitions contributed directly to the rise of modern science, no matter how sweet one finds the irony. But the 1277 prohibitions did motivate new philosophical speculation. The manuscript record is unequivocal on that point. Bishop Tempier’s attempt to interdict philosophy provoked further philosophizing,

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<sup>9</sup> Verger, *Les universités au moyen âge*, pp. 96 – 100.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Duhem, *Etudes sur Leonard de Vinci*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1906 – 1913).

<sup>11</sup> An evenhanded and helpful assessment of the “Duhem thesis” is available in Reijer Hooykaas’s article, “The Rise of Modern Science; When and Why?”, available at [www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/BPL/Images/Content\\_store/Sample\\_chapter/9780631236306/001.pdf](http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/BPL/Images/Content_store/Sample_chapter/9780631236306/001.pdf).



and some of the new ideas generated by that further philosophizing were picked up later and developed in the modern conception of a mechanistic universe governed by natural laws. And, we should hasten to add, the 1277 prohibitions were annulled in the fourteenth century.

## **II. Warnings from Church History and a Possible Application**

Academic theology at Paris during the thirteenth century has some warnings for us. It warns that efforts at interdicting philosophy are not always effective in the long term. Members of the next and smarter generation tend to ignore such efforts. Also, attempts at interdicting philosophy often provoke unanticipated consequences. They motivate further philosophizing, which can create conditions more dire than the original conditions that motivated the interdiction in the first place.

These warnings suggest a contemporary example with which I shall close. Anglicans have historically recognized three sources of authority for Christian faith and practice: the Holy Scriptures, Christian tradition, and human reason. In a way that resonates with the aspirations and achievements of the thirteenth-century theologians, the early Anglican theologians chose to not interdict philosophy. Unlike the continental reformers who cried “*sola scriptura*,” and unlike their Roman counterparts who relied too optimistically on tradition, the Anglicans included the human intellect as a third and mitigating determinant of faith. They insisted that reasoning operates in living dialectic with the Holy Scriptures and tradition as a gift and guide to the faithful. They affirmed a careful trust in human rationality as a resource for better understanding and articulating their faith.

Beginning in the late 1960s and continuing until his death in 2004, Jacques Derrida pursued and perfected a philosophical critique of writing that decentered the “presence,” the source, the objective referentiality of written language.<sup>12</sup> Derrida’s philosophical critique

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<sup>12</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s preface to her translation of Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967) is still a very helpful introduction to deconstruction. Spivak,

undermines textual authority, an outcome that would naturally be threatening to an Anglican who affirms the authority of Scripture. But perhaps that same Anglican should not rush to interdict deconstruction. Maybe he or she should instead join others who are engaging deconstruction's philosophical challenge to textual authority.

The thirteenth-century theologians we have considered might be helpful in such engagement, for Derrida, like Aristotle, might offer some philosophical assistance for our theologizing. Engagement with deconstruction might lead one to conclude with Alexander of Hales that, "No, this is not an acceptable approach to the textual authority of the Holy Scriptures." But continued conversation with deconstructionists in the effort to construct an adequate and compelling account of how texts function as authoritative could lead elsewhere. Scholars have been engaging deconstruction and its import for Biblical criticism in particular, and for Christian faith in general, for some time.<sup>13</sup> As William of Auxerre showed, a fruitful analogy to some dimension of deconstruction might yet arise out of the engagement. Or, as in the case of the thirteenth-century debates about what kind of science theology is, further conversation might generate a creative way to surpass the binaries of deconstruction. I think of the binaries of the present and the absent, or of the important and the apparently secondary. Derrida asserted that the essential nature of written language demands the inversion of the important and secondary, but engaging that inversion could cause a third way to open up just as continued engagement with Aristotle and the broader philosophical tradition cause affective theology to open up as a possibility at the end of the thirteenth century.

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"Translator's Preface," in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore; corrected edition, 1997), pp. ix – lxxxvii.

<sup>13</sup> Episcopalian New Testament scholar A. K. M. Adam engages deconstruction in this way in *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World* (Minneapolis, 2006), and in *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* Augsburg Fortress Press's Guides to Biblical Scholarship, New Testament Series (Minneapolis, 1995). On deconstruction and the Christian faith more generally, see Mark Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (Minneapolis, 1982); and *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago, 1984). Also see J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Westmont, IL, 1995).

I'll stop. You catch my drift. Interdiction of deconstruction would make such potentially fruitful conversation very difficult.