How Not to Turn Water into Wine: John Wippel's Thomistic Appraisal of the Possibility of a Christian Philosophy

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Abstract: In the present paper we revisit and analyze the thought of John Wippel on the topic of the legitimacy or otherwise of a Christian philosophy, a debate which involved some of the towering figures of twentieth-century European philosophy, such as Étienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, and Fernand Van Steenberghen. Wippel's Thomistic appraisal of the possibility of a Christian philosophy values the key distinction between the order/moment of discovery and the order/moment of proof. This distinction allows him to accept the expression in the first order/moment, but not in the second. His understanding of the issue captures two essential aspects, which any debate around Christian philosophy should always safeguard. The first aspect is methodological, since it distinguishes between philosophy and theology, reason and faith. The second aspect is existential, because it stresses the personal character of the philosophical quest undertaken by every Christian philosopher. For these reasons, Wippel's classic, Thomistic understanding of the concept of Christian philosophy is still relevant today, and deserves to be rediscovered.
Keywords: John Wippel; Christian Philosophy; Christian Philosopher; Philosophy; Theology; Faith.

ES Cómo no convertir el agua en vino: La valoración tomista de John Wippel sobre la posibilidad de una filosofía cristiana

Resumen: En el presente artículo revisitamos y analizamos el pensamiento de John Wippel sobre el tema de la posibilidad o no de la existencia de una filosofía cristiana, un debate que interesó unas de las figuras mas representativas de la filosofía europea del siglo veinte: Étienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, y Fernand Van Steenberghen. La postura tomística de Wippel sobre la posibilidad de la existencia de una filosofía cristiana valora la distinción clave entre el orden/momento del descubrimiento y el orden/momento de la prueba. Dicha distinción le permite aceptar la expresión en el primer orden/momento, pero no en el segundo. Su perspectiva sobre este tema captura dos aspectos esenciales, que cualquier debate alrededor de la filosofía cristiana debería tutelar siempre: el aspecto metodológico, que distingue entre filosofía y teología, razón y fe, y el aspecto existencial, que subraya el carácter personal de la búsqueda filosófica emprendida por cada filósofo cristiano. Por estas razones, la postura clásica, tomística, sobre la filosofía cristiana adoptada por Wippel sigue siendo relevante hoy en día, y merece ser redescubierta.
Palabras clave: John Wippel; Filosofía cristiana; Filósofo cristiano; Filosofía; Teología; Fe.

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1. Introduction: Discovering Wippel

I owe to John O'Callaghan my first introduction to the thought of Rev. Wippel in 2019. At the time, while visiting the Jacques Maritain Center at Notre Dame, I was investigating the great twentieth-century debates surrounding the concept of Christian philosophy, and I was seeking new sources to delve deeper into the faith-reason relation. O'Callaghan suggested the reading of Wippel's classic *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Wippel, 2000b) which in turn led me to consulting the three-book series *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*. In the first chapter of volume one, titled "Thomas Aquinas and the Problem of Christian Philosophy" (Wippel, 1984b: 1-33) the influence of Belgian philosopher Fernand Van Steenberghen (1904-1993), the director of his Ph.D. thesis at Louvain, is noticeable[1]. Nevertheless, Wippel's thought on the matter cannot be reduced to that of Van Steenberghen. His works on this issue offer some important guidelines on how to navigate epistemological debates around the faith-reason relation –of which the topic of Christian philosophy is a specification. They are, thus, part of his enduring legacy for contemporary philosophy, and deserve to be rediscovered.

In this paper, I will proceed as follows. Firstly, I will recall very briefly the essential elements of Van Steenberghen's reflection on the meaning of the concept of Christian philosophy. Secondly, I will revisit in detail Wippel's thought on the same issue, carefully pinpointing his several elements of originality. The second task will be performed in this way: 1) I will recall Wippel's analysis of Gilson's understanding of Christian philosophy; 2) I will present his own elaboration of Christian philosophy; 3) I will conclude by interpreting his Thomistic understanding of this concept as a fundamental component of Wippel's teaching, one that scholars debating the reason-faith relation today should take into due account[2].

2. Van Steenberghen on the Concept of Christian Philosophy

Fernand Van Steenberghen has been without any doubt one of the most significant voices of the great French debate around the concept of Christian philosophy. In 1933, he attended the IIe journée de philosophie of the Societé Thomiste at Juvisy, as member of the delegation from Louvain. Ever since the publication of his detailed report of that meeting[3], Van Steenberghen embodied a staunch opposition against the possibility of a Christian philosophy. Over the course of his long and prolific academic career as a noted philosopher and historian of medieval philosophy, he wrote repeatedly on this issue, essentially reproposing and re-actualizing the core elements of his first elaboration. His exchanges with Étienne Gilson on the concept at stake, as well as on whether or not the evidence from medieval philosophy bore out either of their respective interpretation are well known among the experts of twentieth-century neo-scholasticism[4]. Wippel himself refers to one of them, as an ideal summary of his master's understanding of the issue[5].

Van Steenberghen's clear-cut position can be recapitulated as follows. For him, there surely are, there were, and there will be Christian philosophers. But, strictly speaking, there cannot be any Christian philosophy. As *opus rationis*, philosophy per se cannot be characterized in that way. If elements of Christianity enter a philosophical line of reasoning, then philosophy turns immediately into theology. The expression "Christian philosophy" could be accepted only insofar as another previous distinction is made, namely, that between philosophy in the strict sense on the one hand and philosophy in the broad sense on the other. Indeed, the latter, if interpreted as a general wisdom, as a vision of the world –a *Weltanschauung*– could be labelled Christian when it is informed by a Christian interpretation of life. In any case, Van Steenberghen always remained very suspicious of the label "Christian philosophy", and in his writings repeatedly urged that it should be dropped. His final judgement remained negative because of the long, confusing, and convoluted debates that, historically, the expression often prompted (Van Steenberghen, 1991: 499-505; Van Steenberghen, 1993: 1087-1092). But Van Steenberghen's verdict was not the final nail in the coffin of the debate, as we can see by taking a closer look at Wippel's understanding of the issue.

3. Wippel on the Concept of Christian Philosophy

Wippel's abovementioned book-chapter, "Thomas Aquinas and the Problem of Christian Philosophy" is a reprinting, with some edits, of a previous 1965 essay, which is his first in-depth treatment of our topic[6]. Significantly, its title is "Etienne Gilson and Christian Philosophy" (Wippel, 1965: 59-87). Gilson and Jacques Maritain are the natural interlocutors of those who want to explore the great twentieth-century debate on our expression[7]. As the two titles taken in conjunction clearly indicate, Wippel does not limit his investigation to

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[1] Wippel's thesis, titled *Fundamental Metaphysical Themes in the Quaestiones quodlibetales of Godfrey of Fontaines*, is the forty-ninth in the chronological 1974 list of dissertations directed by Van Steenberghen; see F. Van Steenberghen, 1974: p. 30. Wippel wrote the entry "Van Steenberghen, Fernand", for the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Wippel, 2003: 386-388). He reviewed Van Steenberghen's important 1966 monograph *La philosophie au XIIIe siècle* (Wippel, 1969: 457-459). His was the presentation of Van Steenbeerghen on the occasion of the award of the Aquinas Medal to the Belgian master (Wippel, 1978: 213-215).

[2] A recent contribution to the debate around Christian philosophy is Simmons, 2018.

[3] An English translation of which is provided by Gregory Sadler, together with a summary of Van Steenberghen's position (Van Steenberghen, 2011: 244-259; Sadler, 2011: 81-83).

[4] For a synthetic but precise presentation of the Gilson-Van Steenberghen exchange on Christian philosophy, see William Haggerty, 2019: 17-35.

[5] The paper is "Étienne Gilson, historien de la pensée médiévale," *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 77 n. 36 (1979): 487-508.

[6] His subsequent "Christian Philosophy", notwithstanding its title, is not directly pertinent to our topic, since it is a very short reflection on the «problems involved in using primary source material from the Christian period in undergraduate courses in philosophy» (Wippel, 1969: 115-118).

[7] For a presentation of the 1930s French debates, together with an English translation of the most significant contributions, see Gregory B. Sadler, 2011. For an in-depth investigation on the concept of Christian philosophy in both Gilson and Maritain, see

an analysis of (the evolution of) Gilson's position. He also elaborates on the lesson that can be learned from Aquinas, in dialogue with the interpretation offered by the French philosopher during his decades-long career. In order to do so, Wippel summarizes briefly the main ideas of Gilson's intellectual autobiography, *The Philosopher and Theology* (Gilson, 1962). Let us follow Wippel then, and revisit with him Gilson's teaching. Indeed, as will become clear during the reconstruction, familiarity with the latter is crucial for a correct understanding of the former.

3.1. Wippel on Gilson

At the start of the analysis, Wippel retraces Gilson's charming memories of his youth, by depicting a broad Catholic context, one in which some fundamental philosophical, metaphysical notions on the human being and on God were naturally instilled inside the minds of the younger generations. Those very notions would appear again to the Christian who undertook philosophical studies, in the form of rationally demonstrable truths (Wippel, 1984b: 2-3). When a young Gilson entered the French academia as a philosophy student, the shared opinion among his professors was that a fully philosophical reflection was not to be found during the middle ages. Thus, the results of his doctoral dissertation, recently published in English as *Theology and the Cartesian Doctrine of Freedom* (Gilson, 2019), turned out to be quite unexpected: the founder of modern philosophy had adopted some philosophical theses of medieval scholasticism! To complicate things, it also seemed that medieval reflection had been theological in nature rather than philosophical, thus suggesting a partial transformation of the theology of scholasticism «into the philosophy of Descartes» (Wippel, 1984b: 5). Gilson highlights a profound change in philosophical reflection, occurred as a result of the latter's encounter with Christian theology (Wippel, 1984b: 6). This is the context from which the Frenchman moved, to delve into the thought of Thomas first, then Bonaventure –an investigation that resulted in the publication of the first edition of *Le thomisme* in 1919, and of *La philosophie de saint Bonaventure* in 1924. In light of these studies, and of the dialogue with his early critics (De Wulf, Mandonnet, Théry), Gilson had come to sketch a complex picture, that could be summarized in three points:

> (1) a series of propositions concerning God, man, and the universe, which could have been taught by the medieval theologians as well as by certain modern philosophers; (2) the fact that most of these were to be found explicitly stated in the theological writings of the great medieval thinkers; (3) the fact that in every comprehensive presentation of these same theses, the medievals had not followed the philosophical but the theological order (Wippel, 1984b: 7).

L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale, first published in 1932, enriched the picture (Gilson, 1940). Indeed, here Gilson identified a number of specific philosophical issues fully developed and elaborated thanks to the influence exercised on them by a Christian environment. A positive influence of Christianity occurred for Gilson within the varied, major philosophical themes indicated by the titles of his *Gifford Lectures*, among which Wippel recalls: «"Being and Its Necessity", "Beings and Their Contingence", "Analogy, Causality and Finality", "The Glory of God", and "Christian Providence"» (Wippel, 1984b: 8). The first two chapters of *L'esprit* –"The Problem of Christian Philosophy" and "The Concept of Christian Philosophy"– were devoted to an analysis of the label that, for Gilson, could best denote the philosophy born of this season. He firstly emphasizes its historicity: the philosophy articulated by the church fathers and by the theologians of medieval scholasticism is Christian (Wippel, 1984b: 8). The reference to Pauline thought in the first chapter of the book is intended to remark the differences between philosophical wisdom on the one hand, and the wisdom preached by Christ on the other. The latter, conceived as a true way of salvation, should be considered as the truly authentic wisdom (Wippel, 1984b: 9). Moreover, starting with Justin who, after a long philosophical travail, found intellectual fulfillment in the truths disclosed by Christian revelation, and then evoking the figures of Augustine, Lactantius, Anselm, and Thomas, Gilson emphasizes a twofold conviction, common to the great thinkers of the patristic and medieval periods. On the one hand, their consciousness of the salvific character of Christianity. On the other hand, their consciousness of Christianity's peculiar contribution to reason – a contribution ideally expressed by the *Dialogue with Trypho*, in which Justin argues that his conversion enabled him become an authentic philosopher (Wippel, 1984b: 9). In light of these arguments, Gilson formulates some of the best-known definitions of the expression under focus. Wippel recalls one of them, from *The Spirit*. The «content of Christian philosophy is that body of rational truths discovered, explored or simply safeguarded, thanks to the help that reason receives from revelation» (Gilson, quoted in Wippel, 1984b: 9). The American philosopher names also the Gilsonian conviction of the intrinsicality of the revelation-reason relationship, an intrinsicality implied by a legitimate use of the expression «Christian philosophy». In Gilson's eyes, this framework is intended to protect rather than undermine the philosophy-theology distinction, as Wippel reminds us in quoting another passage from *L'esprit* that reiterates the distinction between faith and philosophy:

> In so far as the believer bases his affirmations on the intimate conviction gained from faith he remains purely and simply a believer, he has not yet entered the gates of philosophy; but when amongst his beliefs he finds some that are capable of becoming objects of science then he becomes a philosopher, and if it is to the Christian faith that he owes this new philosophical insight, he becomes a Christian philosopher (Gilson, quoted in Wippel, 1984b: 10).

This quote is followed by a well-known definition: «Thus I call Christian, *every philosophy which, although keeping the two orders formally distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation as an indispensable*

Grosso, 2006.

auxiliary to reason» (Gilson, quoted in Wippel, 1984b: 10, emphasis in original). Another formulation is taken from *Elements of Christian Philosophy*: «Christian philosophy is that way of philosophizing in which the Christian faith and the human intellect join forces in a common investigation of philosophical truth» (Gilson, quoted in Wippel, 1984b: 10). Commenting on these passages, Wippel remarks how, for Gilson, from a formal point of view philosophy and theology must be considered distinct: «in the formal order one is concerned with the essence of a thing. If it is of the essence of philosophy to operate in the light of natural reason, it is of the essence of theology to proceed under the light of revelation. The two orders are formally distinct» (Wippel, 1984b: 10). Therefore, a Christian philosophy, abstractly considered, cannot properly exist. But Gilson is not concerned with abstract formulas. His focus is rather historical: he wants to bring out a definite historical fact, and to find a synthetic formula that can best characterize it.

At this point, Wippel invites us to consider an important parallelism between Gilson and Maritain. Indeed, the distinction articulated by the former seems to match the latter's, between the nature and the state of philosophy. Wippel recalls a number of passages from *An Essay on Christian Philosophy* (Maritain, 2022) as well as from *Science and Wisdom* (Maritain, 1954) that illustrate Maritain's position. If on the one hand theoretical philosophy must be considered as rational in nature, on the other hand it can properly be labelled as Christian in its state when performed by adherents of that faith. Therefore, the Christian philosopher engaged in Christian philosophy will be well aware of what his faith teaches about the nature of man – fallen and redeemed by grace. From his faith, he will also learn some truths that would otherwise remain inaccessible (Wippel, 1984b: 11), and he will investigate those very truths with his rational toolkit. The same can be said to describe Gilson's position.

> If one objects that, since philosophy is distinct from faith, the latter can have nothing to do with the former save in some purely extrinsic way, Gilson will no doubt agree that such is true in the formal order. But taken as a concretely observable reality, such will not be true of Christian philosophy. Here its Christian condition and mode of existence must be taken into account (Wippel, 1984b: 12-13).

Wippel touches upon other significant elements of the Gilsonian contribution. In addition to the negative role played by faith towards philosophical reason –faith warns reason against possible philosophical mistakes incompatible with certain theological truths–, also a positive one should be stressed. Indeed, faith offers philosophy some truths per se accessible by natural reason, but in fact not fully emerged before revelation (Wippel, 1984b: 13). For Gilson, other typical features of a Christian philosophizing are the selection of the major themes of interest –God and man; its inner «tendency to systematize» (Wippel, 1984b: 13); the idea that such philosophizing is endowed with all the necessary elements to be brought to fruition (Wippel, 1984b: 14). In his analysis, Wippel indicates how, according to this conception, a «real connection» should be recognized between two distinct types of theology, the natural and the revealed, for two different orders of reasons. On the one hand, the most important natural theologians «have also been professional theologians». On the other hand, according to Gilson all the attempts to separate philosophy from theology resulted in a «disaster» (Wippel, 1984b: 15).

The evolution of Gilson's thought on Christian philosophy resulted in a proposal for its inclusion within theological reflection. To shore up this position, Gilson draws on Aquinas, and specifically on the Thomist distinction between natural and revealed theology, elaborated in his commentary of Boethius's *De Trinitate*. While the distinction would hold up if drawn in the formal order, it would nonetheless cease to be valid in the concrete one –the order that interested Thomas most. In this context, the "concrete order" is, thus, the theological sphere, in which alone Aquinas's most original philosophical ideas could be detected.

According to Wippel's understanding of Gilson, therefore, «the philosophy which the theologian applies in his theology remains philosophical in its nature, formally considered. But it is now employed in a higher task, the theological, and subjected to a higher light; and thereby it becomes a part of theology» (Wippel, 1984b: 19). We would thus be witnessing a «transfiguration» of philosophy into theology (Wippel, 1984b: 20). Wippel notes how, following this line of reasoning, the Gilsonian conception of Christian philosophy broadens, to the point of transcending «the distinction of scholastic philosophy and scholastic theology» (Gilson, quoted in Wippel, 1984b: 20). It would now stand for «the use the Christian makes of philosophy in either philosophy or theology insofar as he joins religious faith and philosophical reasoning» (Wippel, 1984b: 20). He also recalls the «practical consequences» deriving from Gilson's proposal. The Christian interested in philosophizing today will benefit greatly from doing so in the manner indicated by Thomas, namely, within a theological framework. Therefore, he will first have to study theology, and then proceed in his philosophical inquiries according to the theological order of treatment found in Aquinas's theological writings (Wippel, 1984b: 20-21).

3.2. Christian in the Order of Discovery, not in the Order of Proof

Wippel, instead, brings forward a rather different view. Indeed, his elaboration is oriented around a distinction between the so-called «moment of discovery» and «moment of proof»[8]. In the first moment, the Christian

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[8] This distinction is articulated in light of another distinction, proposed by Anton Pegis in 1963. Pegis identifies an «ambivalence» characterizing medieval philosophy. Indeed, on the one hand, it could be described as a genuine philosophical enterprise, developed in a Christian cultural context, and therefore qualifying in all respects as Christian philosophy. On the other hand, its instrumental use should not be forgotten: that philosophy was used by theologians ruminating on revelation in order to refine their great theological constructions. This prompts Pegis to distinguish the «Christian character» of medieval philosophy from its «theological state of service» (Pegis, quoted in Wippel, 1984b: 22). Wippel, thus, concludes that «as Christian this philosophy remained philosophical in substance, and for that reason deserves to be called Christian philosophy, not Christian theology. But

philosopher comes into contact, through his faith, with certain notions that constitute some of the fundamental truths of his belief, and which are also philosophically investigable. Wippel is ready to concede the use of the expression "Christian philosophy" to characterize this level. The second moment, on the other hand, concerns the articulation of a strictly philosophical discourse around those same notions. At this level, however, the epithet "Christian" to designate the philosophical enterprise must be rejected, since here an insertion of revealed premises within the line of argumentation would immediately transmute philosophy into theology[9].

Wippel develops his position with a further, related distinction between two different theoretical-conceptual movements, namely: the move from a given religious belief to its philosophical elaboration on the one hand, and from a given theological position to its philosophical elaboration on the other (Wippel, 1984b: 24). The mature Gilson identified both movements in Aquinas, and made use of them to articulate his own idea of Christian philosophy. However, Wippel invites those who want to understand correctly Thomas's conception of philosophy, and his way of philosophizing, to retain only the former.

This choice is motivated through a critique of two other points central to Gilsonian hermeneutics: Gilson's judgment about the *loci* of Thomas's production, in which it would be possible to detect the original elements of his metaphysical thought, and Gilson's choice to expound Thomas's philosophical system following a theological order (Wippel, 1984b: 24). Wippel, in contrast, follows Van Steenberghen's classification of Aquinas's works[10], and defends the significance and importance of the philosophical works for understanding Thomas's philosophical thought –against Gilson's thesis, which tended instead to downplay them in favor of the theological ones (Wippel, 1984b: 27). As concerns the latter, our author recalls a distinction already drawn by his master. In the theological production of the Angelic Doctor, one can find philosophical treatises inside theological contexts. The former can be extracted from the latter and, thus, studied for understanding Aquinas's philosophy. Some examples are Questions 5 and 6 of the commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate* –on the epistemology of the natural, mathematical, and metaphysical sciences–, as well as the treatises on God and man in the *Summa theologiae* (Wippel, 1984b: 28). Furthermore, in Thomas's theological works we can also find a philosophy used instrumentally for investigating purely theological themes, such as the Trinity and incarnation. Although Wippel promptly admits that, in this case, «the philosophy in question has surely become theology», he nevertheless considers its analysis useful and precious in order to unearth the «philosophical choices» underlying Thomas's theology (Wippel, 1984b: 28). «In sum, therefore, it would seem that any and all of Thomas's writings, to the extent that they clearly employ metaphysical argumentation, may be regarded as legitimate sources for recovering his metaphysical thought» (Wippel, 1984b: 29).

As for the idea to expound Thomas's philosophy following a theological order, Wippel firstly argues that Aquinas's philosophical elaboration took place prior to his theological one. He corroborates this statement with an incisive footnote quote of Van Steenberghen: «Thomas d'Aquin a été un théologien de génie parce qu'il a été un philosophe de génie» (Van Steenberghen, quoted in Wippel, 1984b: 29 n. 80). Secondly, he recalls how, in the commentary on *De Trinitate*, Thomas devotes himself to set out his position regarding the proper subject-matter of metaphysics, the cognitive methodology to be employed in it, and the relationship between its subject-matter and God (Wippel, 1984b: 29). For Thomas, metaphysics tackles being as being, and its cognitive method is *separatio* (separation). The relation between the subject-matter of metaphysics and God can be understood in this way: metaphysics –the science of being as being– is concerned with «divine things» solely insofar as they represent the causal principles of being as being (Wippel, 1984b: 31). The same indications can also be found within the proem to the commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Gilson's hermeneutics thus seems to be countered by these very passages.

> Reference to these passages should be sufficient to show that in Thomas's mind there is no confusion between metaphysics, on the one hand, and the theology based on revelation, on the other. If metaphysics has as its subject being in general, theology has as its subject God and divine things […] For the present it is enough for us to note that there are ample indications in Thomas's writings concerning his views with respect to the nature, the subject-matter, and the method appropriate to metaphysics. It would seem, therefore, that if one wishes to recover the elements of this metaphysics from Thomas's various writings, one should present these elements according to the philosophical order outlined by Thomas himself, not according to the theological order proposed by Gilson (Wippel, 1984b: 32).

Wippel returns again to the issue of Christian philosophy in another essay of the same year, published in the prestigious American journal *Faith and Philosophy* under the title "The Possibility of a Christian Philosophy: A Thomistic Perspective" (Wippel, 1984a: 272-290). The presence of *Romans* 1:20 at the very beginning of the first section is strategic: regardless of the correctness or otherwise of the exegetical current that reads it as a natural theology *in nuce*, that very reference signals its repeated use for the purpose of arguing that some truths about God are earnable even upstream of His self-manifestation (Wippel, 1984a: 273). Justin himself, Wippel's argument goes, can be recalled to emphasize the same point: although, as mentioned in the previous essay, he described Christianity as «the only sure and useful philosophy» (Wippel, 1984a: 273), his referring to the prophets as those who offered no evidence to support their claims, since they were «reliable witnesses of

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as a theological instrument it was involved in a labor which was imposed on it neither as philosophy nor as Christian» (Wippel, 1984b: 23).

[9] Wippel first found this distinction in some writings of Klubertanz, Naud, and Grisez (Wippel, 1984b: 24, n. 65. See Klubertanz, 1963; Naud, 1960; Grisez, 1962).

[10] The classification is the following: philosophical commentaries, biblical commentaries, theological commentaries, theological syntheses, disputed and quodlibetal questions, theological opuscula, philosophical opuscula (Wippel, 1984b: 25).

the truth» and therefore «beyond proof» (Justin, quoted in Wippel, 1984a: 273), signals an implicit distinction between belief in something by faith on the one hand, and its acceptance upon demonstration on the other (Wippel, 1984a: 273). A clear distinction between belief by faith and philosophical demonstration is also present in Augustine's *De libero arbitrio*, book two, as well as in Boethius, whose *Consolation of Philosophy* is exquisitely philosophical (Wippel, 1984a: 273-274). That said, the fact remains however that the vast majority of thinkers from the historical period of the above-mentioned authors were not engaged in the articulation of a philosophy in the proper sense, let alone in the protection of its disciplinary autonomy. Rather, their interest centered on the articulation of a more generic «Christian wisdom». Such kind of wisdom could even be defined as Christian philosophy, provided that we conceive of philosophy in a very broad sense: the sense indicated by the German term *Weltanschauung*. However, Wippel objects to this usage, insofar as its excessive breadth ends up including both philosophical and theological aspects of the alleged Christian philosophy (Wippel, 1984a: 274). If we decide to safeguard the classic definition of philosophy as *opus rationis*, a better strategy seems to be at hand. We could label the mentioned authors Christian philosophers while eschewing an interpretation of their intellectual production as a Christian philosophy (Wippel, 1984a: 274). The figure of Aquinas reemerges, since he articulated an accurate distinction between faith and reason, philosophy and theology. His commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate* is reiterated to be paradigmatic in this regard (Wippel, 1984a: 274-279). To argue the usefulness of Thomas's thought for a Christian who wishes to philosophize today, Wippel invokes once again the key distinction between the order/moment of discovery and the order/moment of demonstration (Wippel, 1984a: 280). Only at the level of the first order/moment will it be possible to preach something like a Christian philosophy. Indeed, to do so at the level of the second order/moment would entail a denial of the philosophical character of the process: «to admit the contributions of faith into the process of proof would be to destroy the philosophical character of the undertaking and to turn it into theology or at the least, into an extension of religious belief» (Wippel, 1984a: 280).

3.3. Thomas Aquinas for Today's Christian Philosophy

Wippel develops his argument by showing the similarity between his own position and Gilson's (/Maritain's) distinction of an abstract sense of philosophy from a concrete one. If, on the one hand, of the concrete sense of philosophy –i.e. philosophy «as it exists in the mind of the philosopher»– one may well preach the Christian character, on the other that same definition cannot be applied to the abstract one, i.e. to its «essence» (Wippel, 1984a: 281). Wippel, thus, subscribes to the overall meaning of the Gilsonian-Maritainian distinction, but only in light of his own distinction between the two moments/orders. Once this framework is accepted, the existence of a Christian philosophy can be affirmed, but only in its moment of discovery, and only while referring to the Christian philosopher engaged in speculation: «philosophy as it exists concretely in the mind of the Christian who philosophizes may be described as Christian in its moment of discovery of certain points, though not in its moment of proof even of those points» (Wippel, 1984a: 281). Of this specific type of Christian philosophy, Wippel is also (cautiously) willing to preach a character of intrinsicity, rather than extrinsicity. An intrinsically Christian philosophy in its moment of discovery is, in conclusion, what can be distilled from his epistemological proposal (Wippel, 1984a: 281). Furthermore, Wippel also suggests that the process by which Aquinas, as well as several of his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors to the present day developed and still develop their philosophy could be defined precisely in the terms just sketched. These terms would frame the process whereby a Christian, who by faith acquires knowledge concerning the conceptual universe of his religion and subsequently decides to philosophize, submits some of those concepts to rational inquiry: «he would be influenced, therefore, in the order of discovery by his religious belief and would practice Christian Philosophy» (Wippel, 1984a: 281). With the clause, of course, that «if he eventually succeeded in demonstrating any such conclusion philosophically, that demonstration would not be Christian philosophy, but pure philosophy» (Wippel, 1984a: 281-282). The examples chosen to shore up this line of reasoning are extremely significant: once again, the second book of Augustine's *De libero arbitrio*, and Anselm's *Proslogion.* In both cases, they are best understood as instantiations of *fides quaerens intellectum*, understood philosophically. In fact, in these writings Augustine and Anselm begin by reaffirming their personal belief in God, and then proceed to articulate a philosophical-rational argument about His existence –thus temporarily bracketing (but not disavowing) their own faith in His existence (Wippel, 1984a: 282). The consciousness of the distinction between the philosophical moment and the theological moment, between reason and faith, common to Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas, represents in good substance one of the most valuable gains, which Wippel hopes will always be transmitted to the Christian who intends to philosophize today. For him, this is one of the methodological lessons best specified by Aquinas.

> One of the great strengths in Thomas's approach [...] is the clarity with which he himself distinguishes between faith and reason, and between faith and philosophy. To me it is important for today's interpreter of Aquinas, and for that matter, for today's believing Christian who would also be a philosopher, to preserve this distinction as clearly as possible. This does not necessarily mean, of course, that one will always sharply distinguish between purely philosophical writings and purely theological writings. Thomas himself often combines philosophizing and theologizing within the same work. But it does mean that one should be consciously aware of what one is doing when one reflects upon such issues – that one should know when one is accepting something for religious reasons or on faith, and when one is attempting to establish a point philosophically (Wippel, 1984a: 282).

The further clarifications at the end of the essay remind one of Van Steenberghen's reflection. First and foremost is the consideration that, should we come across a speculation that seems to present itself as philosophical but which, on closer inspection, assumes as fundamental data this or that element of revealed theology as well as their veracity, more specifically, the veracity of those elements that by no means could be demonstrated rationally, we would not be engaging «pure philosophy», nor «Christian philosophy», but rather «speculative theology». «Here, to use a metaphor taken from Aquinas himself, the water of philosophy will have been transformed into the wine of theology» (Wippel, 1984a: 283)[11]. Moreover, if among the conditions of inquiry just mentioned we drop the assumption of the truthfulness of the specific aspect of Christianity under focus, then we will be moving within the field of philosophy, not theology. In any case, such philosophy will not be Christian: «to make such an inference would be somewhat like moving immediately from the objective genitive (a philosophy of Christianity in that it is about Christian beliefs) to the subjective genitive (a philosophy of Christianity in the sense that it is exercised by some one who is Christian, and in a distinctively Christian way)» (Wippel, 1984a: 283). In light of these considerations, we could thus label this kind of philosophy as a philosophy of (Christian) religion.

In the last paragraph Wippel, drawing on Aquinas's methodology, elaborates a generic grid, a sort of dichotomous table in the form of successive questions, which may offer initial guidance to scholars coming across investigations that perhaps might be labelled as Christian philosophy. The first question asks whether or not the inquiry safeguards a clear distinction between philosophy and faith. The second question asks whether or not the inquiry safeguards a clear distinction between philosophy and theology, and between the specific components that, of said inquiry, pertain to philosophy and theology respectively. If these questions are answered in the affirmative, a new question must be asked whether any designation of such an inquiry as Christian philosophy would be justified by its reference to an inherently, «distinctively Christian» component thereof. In the event of a negative answer to the first and/or the second question, we will probably be faced with a non-philosophical inquiry. In the event of a negative answer to the last question, and assuming that one is indeed faced with a philosophical inquiry, the epithet probably should not be assigned (Wippel, 1984a: 284).

4. Conclusion: Saving the Water and the Wine

In conclusion, let us give voice once again to our author. Wippel reiterates his Thomistic convictions about the faith-reason issue also in subsequent academic production. The expert eye will easily detect the several implicit assumptions which confirm his previous treatment of Christian philosophy. Take, for example, the following passage, from his 1995 Aquinas Lecture –*Mediæval Reactions to the Encounter between Faith and Reason* (Wippel, 1995). While characterizing Aquinas's theory of the harmony of faith and reason, he describes Thomas as follows:

> Without pausing here to enter into a long discussion of whether he was a theologian or a philosopher or perhaps a Christian philosopher, I would only repeat the position I have developed elsewhere. He was both a philosopher and a theologian since he had recognized from the beginning of his career the need to develop a sound philosophy if he was to have any chance of developing a sound theology. For us today this means that if one is interested in studying the philosophical thought of Thomas Aquinas, one can surely do so. One should take one's cue from Thomas's own presentation of the subject matter, the distinctive methodologies, and the order to be followed in the philosophical sciences, and apply this to all of his texts which have philosophical content. In doing this one must be as conscious at all times as Thomas himself was of the distinction between faith and reason, and between philosophy and theology (Wippel, 1995: 33-34).

This quote does not limit itself to reconstruct the intellectual profile of a great protagonist of the middle ages. Included in this description is an implicit invitation to contemporary Christian philosophers to follow in the footsteps of Aquinas. This message, already present in "The Possibility of a Christian Philosophy", re-emerges explicitly on the occasion of his awarding of the Aquinas Medal, in 1999. The context is particularly significant, because in this suggestive writing Wippel summarizes succinctly his intellectual path, and distills some theoretical lessons he learned, with the clear aim of transmitting them to future generations of scholars.

> It continues to be my personal philosophical opinion that Aquinas has much to offer philosophers today who are interested in exploring what we might call the eternal questions, those having to do with the meaning of being, the nature and structure of finite or created beings, the ultimate causal explanation for created reality, the existence and nature of God, the problem of evil, divine foreknowledge and human freedom, the nature and destiny of the human being, the foundations of morality, etc. And it seems to me that Aquinas's views on the harmony between faith and reason can still serve as a model for those who would philosophize in a way that is not incompatible with the Catholic intellectual tradition (Wippel, 2000a: 24)[12].

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[11]   The reference here is to *In De Trinitate*, Qu. 2, art. 3, ad 5.
[12]   Another autobiographical reflection on the part of Wippel can be found at the end of the second Festschrift in his honor, recently published: Cory and Doolan (eds.), 2024: 373-380.

The last passage of the quote is best read in light of his Thomistic understanding of the concept of Christian philosophy[13]. This understanding is part and parcel of his enduring legacy for contemporary philosophy, Christian or otherwise[14].

Let us summarize the reasons for its importance. His nuanced rumination safeguards the fundamental elements emerged during the twentieth-century debate. Indeed, on the one hand, Wippel adopts the extreme conceptual precision constantly displayed, and constantly demanded by his *Doktorvater*. With his distinction of the two orders, in line with the teaching of Van Steenberghen, Wippel is able to save the water of philosophy and the wine of theology, avoiding an undue transformation, and thus letting the Christian taste both in their purest essence. On the other hand, he is also sympathetic to Gilson and Maritain, because he shares with them their vivid interest in concrete human experience, which their distinction intends to safeguard. However, Wippel's own distinction of the two orders helps him handle cleverly the shift present inside the Gilsonian and Maritainian conceptions of Christian philosophy, namely, that from the discipline in itself to those who cultivate said discipline[15]. Indeed, strictly speaking, the fact that a Christian philosophizes does not render his philosophy essentially Christian. But Wippel is able to have the best of both worlds. In order to understand the experience of the Christian who philosophizes, he not only finds room for a viable use of the label «Christian philosophy», which he accepts in the moment of discovery, but also simultaneously safeguards philosophy's purity, rejecting the label in the moment of proof.

In this context, we think that a constant, careful distinction between philosophy and theology does not undermine the very unity of the reality that each of these disciplines, with its specific toolkit, investigates. Said unity is not threatened by an approach that not only focuses on the peculiarities of the object under study, but also on the ways in which it can and should be investigated. In other words, we are convinced that the accusation leveled against the defenders of the philosophy-theology distinction, of splitting that which should not be parted, is misguided. The philosophical and the theological analysis are two equally legitimate approaches to one same object, which will be illuminated now by the former, now by the latter, without losing its unity. Furthermore, those specificities illuminated by the philosophical approach will not be destroyed when the theological approach is adopted, and vice versa: they will simply remain momentarily unthematized.

Moreover, Wippel's protection of disciplinary boundaries does not come at the cost of sacrificing the real centrality, for both philosophy and theology, of the uniqueness, historicity, and personal faith of each and every believer. On the contrary, Wippel's distinction can be said to ennoble them. Indeed, the message emerging from his reflection on Christian philosophy is that Christian philosophers, as Christians, can and should engage in philosophy qua philosophy. The promise of such an invitation is that this enterprise will not represent a menace for the believer. Philosophical reason will not be a stumbling block in his path, it will be a precious ally. In this sense, it seems to us that Wippel's proposal is also in line with one of the most notable achievements of twentieth-century theology, namely, the so-called anthropological turn. The subject, with his intellect, his desire, and his dialogue with God, is now at the center of theological reflection.

As each and every Christian who philosophizes, Father Wippel, with his historical situatedness, his personality, and his faith, testified to the charm and challenges of the adventure of reason, an adventure that could be expressed with a variation on Aquinas's noted aphorism: *hic christianus singularis philosophatur*.

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[13] See also this passage from the "Introduction" to *The Metaphysical Thought*: «On other occasions I have examined and critically evaluated the Gilsonian position, and need not repeat that critique here. Suffice it to say that, while I recognize with Gilson that Aquinas never wrote a *Summa philosophiae* or a *Summa metaphysicae*, I am convinced that a well worked out metaphysics existed in his own mind and can be recovered from his various writings. Indeed, his development of this underlying metaphysics was a necessary condition for him to create his highly original speculative theology» (Wippel, 2000b: xvii).

[14] Wippel's legacy is testified by two books in his honor: Doolan (ed.), 2012; Cory and Doolan (eds.), 2024.

[15] A thorough reflection on this shift in Maritain's epistemological treatise *Distinguish to Unite: Or, The Degrees of Knowledge* is offered by Vigna, 2015: 353-381. We analyze this and other essays of Vigna on the relationship between reason and faith in Barzaghi, 2022.

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