The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays on Fides et Ratio, edited by David Ruel Foster & Joseph W. Koterski, SJ

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The editors describe the purpose of this volume “to help deepen appreciation for the stereophonic approach to truth” that Pope John Paul II suggests in the reference in *Fides et Ratio* to faith and reason as “the two wings” of Catholic thought (Foster & Koterski, 2003, p. ix). These 10 essays on *Fides et Ratio* combine by dividing: understanding each wing’s operation by itself allows a firmer grasp of how they work together to allow a tradition to take flight.

The book has three parts. Section 1 addresses the doctrinal ramifications and developments occasioned by the pope’s encyclical as they pertain to the possibility of a Christian philosophy, the fate of metaphysics, theological anthropology and our understanding of the person, and the role of Mary and the effects of a Marian framework in an encyclical devoted to faith and reason. Section 2 concerns implications and applications of *Fides et Ratio* to Catholic higher education and to contemporary culture. Section 3 puts the encyclical into historical context by discussing the role of wisdom literature, medieval philosophy and theology, contemporary philosophy, and the Church’s own teaching from Vatican I to John Paul II. A useful summary outline of *Fides et Ratio* follows the third part.

The real contribution of The Two Wings of Catholic Thought is to convey very effectively – better than the encyclical itself does – just why *Fides et Ratio* ultimately matters inside the Church and for important issues in wider culture. Despite appearances in both tone and texture, it turns out that John Paul II’s analysis of the two wings of Catholic thought has wider appeal than only to theological ornithologists with advanced degrees. Instead, this volume ably demonstrates how *Fides et Ratio* speaks to the birdwatcher inside every child of God.

Faith. Both of the editors in their respective essays point to the irony of a
pope defending the claims of reason. But what John Paul II is doing in this
encyclical is a rearguard defense of faith and revelation through a strategy of
bolstering reason. How? Koterski shows how one does not defend faith by
attacking the claims of reason. Rather, only by defending the claims and
power of reason does one truly shore up the faith. As John Paul II shows,
faith without any rational component can easily degenerate into feelings or
superstition. A fideism which divorces reason from faith is first cousin to
gullibility; and gullibility in our era of increasing religious violence is, liter-
ally, deadly. Moreover, feelings and faith based only as far as personal expe-
rience runs will obviously be different for every individual. Faith that is
either emotionally or propositionally different for every individual is simply
not sturdy enough to accommodate the claims of Christianity toward uni-
versal truth. In this way, an enervated philosophy, which also denies the possi-
bility of universal truth, only complements a flimsy faith. Instead, a robust
confidence in universal truth (which in our day is attacked by postmod-
ernisms of various stripes mentioned in the encyclical) puts the claims of
faith on firmer footing. As John Paul II says in *Fides et Ratio*, “theology
needs philosophy as a partner in dialogue in order to confirm the intelligibil-
ity and universal truth of its claims” (1998, §77).

**Faithfulness.** The problem that this encyclical identifies is that philosophy
in our day is effectively moving in reverse. It has lost faith in itself and its
historic calling to pursue truth and meaning. Nothing better shows the
hermeneutical circle at work in the operations of faith and reason than this
very point: a commitment to the power of reason to know what is transcen-
dent (or the lack of such a commitment) must act as a presupposition to
philosophical inquiry and never as a conclusion that philosophical inquiry
could itself reach without horribly begging the question along the way. John
Paul II speaks of “attitudes of widespread distrust of the human being’s great
capacity for knowledge” (1998, §5). These attitudes disparage not only phi-
losophy, but also the human person. Allen, in the essay “Person and
Complementarity in *Fides et Ratio*” calls appropriate attention to John Paul
II’s personalism. What can be known is less important in this encyclical than
who knows it. A theological anthropology is subtext to the entire encyclical,
occasionally rising to the surface as when John Paul “define[s] the human
being” as “the one who seeks the truth” (§28). That’s why nihilism, for
example, is “a denial of the humanity and of the very identity of the human
being” (§90). In short, philosophy damages more than itself when it retreats
from its highest aspirations. It leaves muddy footprints all over the pope’s
image of authentic humanity.

**Justice.** Not surprisingly, Koterski also situates *Fides et Ratio* in the tradi-
tion of papal social encyclicals. The Church social tradition rests firmly on
the notion that each individual has a unique and inestimable human dignity.
Absent that truth and you imperil social relations. There would then be no
rights that all persons deserve in virtue of being persons. There could then be
no true democracy, for John Paul II has repeatedly shown in various writings
that democracy can only be sustained on a foundation where the people are
protected from assaults on their most basic human dignity. “Metaphysics,”
says John Paul II, “makes it possible to ground the concept of personal dig-
nity in virtue of their spiritual nature” (1998, §83). “Objective truth,” says
the pope, is “the very ground of human dignity” (§90). Attacking objective
truth attacks human dignity, which leads to a “destructive will to power”
(§90) that cancels out freedom and robs humanity of the hope for fullness of
life. Desiring freedom, we imprison ourselves. It is an old story with echoes
in the first garden of creation. Thus says the pope, “Once the truth is denied
to human beings, it is pure illusion to try to set them free” (§90).

Education. If there is no truth, then there is literally nothing to discuss, pur-
sue as a goal, argue about, sharpen insights in the service of, and so on. This
reduces education to indoctrination and makes any attempt to advance a con-
versation into a power play with built-in advantage to the side with the most
resources, loudest voice, or social leverage.

Freedom of Conscience. To say, as the pope does, that we are made to
“seek” the truth implies that it is not simply handed to us. Activity is
required, and activity which is a true search implies a sifting of various alter-
natives to yield forward movement. For this reason, in his essay on the impli-
cations of Fides et Ratio for Catholic universities, Foster sees in this encyc-
clical an endorsement of academic freedom that supplements “the paucity of Ex
Corde Ecclesiae’s treatment” (Foster & Koterski, 2003, p. 115). A shared
pursuit of the truth requires a shared commitment to authentic dialogue, for
truth is discovered by a pilgrim Church in unfettered conversation with other
sincere seekers. Foster puts it helpfully concluding, “without truth there is no
freedom” (p. 119). Even John Paul II states, “Truth and freedom either go
together hand in hand or together they perish in misery” (1998, §90). One
might well extend this point to apply to the relationship between theologians
and the magisterium. Clearly, this is an application of Foster’s point that
would be heavily at odds with Fides et Ratio. But if so, there is an internal
tension in this encyclical that calls for further inquiry.

One of the more intriguing narrative reconstructions of the relationship
between philosophy and theology is found in Quinn’s essay “Infides et
Unratio: Modern Philosophy and the Papal Encyclical.” Quinn’s point is that
because of onerous ecclesial or civil sanctions (or both), philosophers could
not mount a frontal assault on the claims of theology. So they did the next best thing. They attacked philosophy itself in what Quinn referred to as “civil war” (Foster & Koterski, 2003, p. 181). Namely, they called into question the Aristotelianism that undergirded various syntheses between Athens and Jerusalem. Even more specifically, the Aristotelian notion of final causality was attacked. That was a ripe target for philosophical barbs because it seemed to smuggle in all sorts of notions of purposeful governance and cosmic plan. Of course, once the plan is impugned, so too the planner.

As would certainly be expected, a volume containing 10 original essays by eight different authors (including both of the editors) will vary both in quality and applicability to the central purpose of this work as described above. Koterski’s second essay in the book, for example, delves so deeply into wisdom literature that it ultimately slights the use that Fides et Ratio makes of it, and could, with the excising of about a dozen of its more than 30 pages, just as well stand unaided in a separate volume on the Hebrew Scriptures.

Koterski’s second essay was as extended as Michael Sweeney’s on “The Medievalism of Fides et Ratio” was truncated. Thomas Aquinas surely has a special place in Fides et Ratio, but John Paul II quite deliberately did not go as far as Leo XIII’s Aeterni Patris in commending Thomism as the Church’s philosophy. “The Church,” says John Paul II, “has no philosophy of her own, nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others” (1998, §49). The reason for this less-than-full embrace might lie in the pope’s own eclectic philosophical training, which was certainly broader than neo-scholasticism. Cardinal Dulles hints at this in the closing essay to the volume on “Faith and Reason: From Vatican I to John Paul II.” Nonetheless, there is a fuller story to be told here than is found in the present book. It would be an especially interesting tale because many theologians writing today who are self-consciously reclaiming Thomistic themes and approaches are battling the same philosophical foes that John Paul II is in Fides et Ratio. His chief allies are not phenomenologists or personalists, but Thomists of various stripes.

A heavier editorial hand might also have asserted itself to minimize the number of times that the same quotations from Fides et Ratio are taken up by different authors in this volume for essentially the same commentary. Perhaps some may appreciate the repetition across essays, but this reviewer found it distracting.

Still others may rightly wonder why only one of the authors is female. In a tradition which has repeatedly characterized women as the seat of emotion rather than of intellect or rationality, a dearth of female voices in a discussion of faith and reason might, sadly, be just what one would expect. The chapter on Mary, written by a Jesuit, is an interesting contribution and poten-
tial corrective to the repeated equating of the male with the rational. And, indeed, there is a real richness in the comparison between Mary’s assent to the angel, which was at one and the same time a forceful fiat combined with the greatest humility, and the role of philosophy to assert its fullest self while remaining conscious of its own limitations. But certainly, despite models of Lady Wisdom in Scripture and Lady Philosophy in Boethius, the Catholic tradition would both benefit from and survive deeper and more potentially painful introspection on how it has repeatedly and regrettably gendered rationality as a predominantly male trait.

REFERENCES

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SCRIPTYURE ON THE SILVER SCREEN

ADELE REINHARTZ
WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS, 2003
$24.95, 256 pages

Reviewed by Ann O. Alokolaro

Even educators in a Catholic school can find it challenging to engage students in a conversation concerning religion or the Bible. Teaching young people today can seem counter-cultural when competing against lessons taught on television, on the radio, and in movies. The Bible does not always seem applicable to today’s world and the lives of young people. Thus, educators use creative ways to entice young minds to see a purpose in reading the Bible and learning about its teachings. Adele Reinhartz of McMaster University has discovered a way to engage students by meeting them where