

## RELIGION'S TWO ALTERNATIVE AND COMPLEMENTARY PATHWAYS: FROM FAITH TO REASON AND FROM REASON TO FAITH

■ ENRICO BERTI

An extraordinary document of the way in which the early Christians – the Apostles themselves actually – intended evangelization is St. Paul's speech to the Athenians, as reported in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Some scholars (Norden, Jaeger) question the authenticity of this speech but they are classical philology scholars rather than New Testament exegesis specialists. However, experts now identify almost beyond doubt the author of Acts as the evangelist Luke, which argues in favour of the authenticity of Paul's discourse, even though any doubts on the latter would still not undermine the historical value of a document that was certainly written by the first Christian communities. The first reason to be interested in the discussion is the fact that it addresses the population of the city which throughout the ancient world had the reputation of being the capital of philosophy, the birthplace of Socrates and Plato, the place where Aristotle, Epicurus and the Stoics taught. The apostle Paul, who was a man of culture, was certainly aware of this fact, and took it into account in his evangelization efforts. The Book of Acts in fact refers that he would debate every day in the public square (the famous *agora*) with whoever happened to be there, among whom there were 'some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers'.<sup>1</sup>

The first reaction of those who listened to Paul preaching about Jesus and resurrection was that he was a promoter of foreign deities. No one in Athens had in fact ever heard of Jesus and especially of his resurrection, a concept entirely alien to Greek culture, which understood the concept of immortality instead, thanks to Platonism, and in some cases even the concept of reincarnation, thanks to Pythagorism. The introduction of foreign gods, for a religion like the Greek one – which was largely a civil religion, one founded on the worship of the gods of the *polis* – was almost a crime. We should not forget that this was what Socrates had been accused of and sentenced to death. Despite this negative reaction, however, Paul's listeners, being Athenians, were curious, because – as the author of the Acts observes – they 'used their time

<sup>1</sup> *Acts* 17, 16-18.

for nothing else but telling or hearing something new'. So they led Paul to the Areopagus, the hill that was the headquarters of the supreme court of Athens, and invited him to explain his doctrine clearly.<sup>2</sup>

The strategy adopted by Paul emerges clearly from the beginning of his speech. He praises the Athenians as very religious, as evidenced by the many temples and shrines found in the *agora*, and claims to have seen among those monuments an altar dedicated 'to an unknown god'. There is no reason to doubt the historicity of this statement, which reveals a very natural concern in those practicing a polytheistic religion, namely the fear of unknown gods and the fact of not wanting to antagonize them. Paul's tactic is to exploit this situation to show that the God proclaimed by him is not a foreign god, but it is exactly the same god that the Athenians worship unknowingly, that is, a god that they themselves acknowledge. This is not a simple *captatio benevolentiae*, as is often said, but a strategic choice made by the Apostle in order to begin with an approach shared by his listeners themselves, in this case with polytheistic, i.e. popular religion.

Straight after this first move, however, Paul completely changes his reference point, because he states: 'The God who made (*poiésas*) the world and all that is in it, the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in sanctuaries made by human hands (*cheiropoiêtois*), nor is he served by human hands as if he needed (*prosdeomenos*) anything. Rather it is he who gives to everyone life and breath and everything'.<sup>3</sup> This is no longer one of the gods of popular religion, but it is the one that would later be called 'the God of philosophers'. Indeed, in *Timaeus* Plato had spoken of a God who made (*poiêtês*) the world and this doctrine had been spread all over the Greek and Roman world thanks to Aristotle's dialogue *De philosophia*, lost to us but read and quoted by many, including pagan philosophers such as Cicero and Jewish philosophers like Philo of Alexandria. Precisely in this dialogue, probably quoting a speech given by the character of Plato, Aristotle had declared that God had the whole world as his temple, not the works made by human hands (*cheiromêta*), and that he did not give orders to servants, because he did not need (*deitai*) anything.<sup>4</sup> These are more or less the same words used by Paul. Aristotle himself, in works that probably derive from the *De*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–21. A bronze plaque with the original text of Paul's discourse in ancient Greek is still visible today in the Areopagus in Athens.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–25.

<sup>4</sup> For a documentation of these affirmations please refer to my *Nuovi studi aristotelici*, IV/1, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2009, pp. 43–63.

*philosophia*, declared that ‘from there’, that is from the God who moves the heavens while remaining motionless, ‘derive the being and life’ of all things.<sup>5</sup>

The discourse continues with more references to the ‘God of philosophers’, when Paul says that this God, having created the nations of men, has fixed for them ‘the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions, so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him’.<sup>6</sup> The ordered seasons mean the changing of the seasons on the earth, and the boundaries of their regions are the divisions between habitable lands and oceans, so the reference is to cosmic order as a whole, which Paul considers as a reason offered to men so that they may seek and find God, even though they might have to ‘grope for him’, i.e. find Him without the help of revelation. Well, even in Aristotle’s *De philosophia* the cosmic order, the work of God, consists in the alternation of the seasons and the division between land and sea, and is listed as one of the signs of God’s existence. Moreover, in the *Letter to the Romans*, as you know, Paul says that the visible things made by God, that is, precisely the cosmic order, show His invisible perfections and thus make Him somewhat knowable to men, regardless of their faith.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, in his speech to the Athenians, Paul says that “‘In him we live and move and have our being”, as even some of your poets have said, “For we too are his offspring” (*genos*)’.<sup>8</sup> Here, as you know, the reference is to the conception of God proper to the Stoics and the quote literally takes a verse of the *Phenomena* of the Stoic poet Aratus of Soli, also quoted in the *Hymn to Zeus* by Cleanthes of Assos. So the reference to the ‘God of philosophers’, i.e. of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, is explicit.

This had already been reported by Joseph Ratzinger in his *Introduction to Christianity*, where he states that ‘early Christianity boldly and resolutely made its choice and carried out its purification by deciding *for* the God of the philosophers and *against* the gods of various religions’, adding that ‘the choice thus made meant opting for the *logos* as against any kind of *mythos*: it meant the definitive demythologization of the world and of religion’.<sup>9</sup> And John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et ratio*, referring explicitly to Paul’s speech to the Athenians, says that ‘If pagans were to understand them, the first Christians could not refer only to “Moses and the prophets” when they

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *De caelo* I 9, 279 a 28–30.

<sup>6</sup> *Acts* 17, 26–27.

<sup>7</sup> *Rom* 1, 19–20.

<sup>8</sup> *Acts* 17, 28.

<sup>9</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Introduzione al cristianesimo*, Brescia, Queriniana, 2003, pp. 128–129. English edition: J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, Communio Books, 2004, pp. 137–138.

spoke. They had to point as well to natural knowledge of God and to the voice of conscience in every human being. Since in pagan religion this natural knowledge had lapsed into idolatry, the Apostle judged it wiser in his speech to make the link with the thinking of the philosophers, who had always set in opposition to the myths and mystery cults notions more respectful of divine transcendence'.<sup>10</sup>

In his speech to the Athenians, the debate against idolatry appears immediately after Paul quotes Aratus, when he says: 'Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the Godhead is like gold or silver or stone, which harbours the imprint of the human imagination or art'.<sup>11</sup> The clearest reference to these words, for the Athenians, was probably the Chryselephantine (i.e., gold and ivory) statue of Athena, positioned in the centre of the Parthenon, which was still visible at the time. Even in Aristotle's *De philosophia*, as evidenced by the Jewish Philo, the concept of one God, creator and ruler of the universe, was opposed to the 'statues made by human hands'. But the apostle's words contain an argument that can only be understood in the light of Greek philosophy. Paul says that since we are God's offspring, we should not think that God is like gold, silver or stone, i.e. the stuff of which statues are made. This means that if we are God's offspring, we are like him, and since we are not made of gold, silver and stone, that is, of matter, God cannot be identified with material statues either, as the popular religion believed. The implication of this argument is that we humans are not matter but spirit, that is – as the Greek philosophers said – intelligence (*nous*). In fact, both Plato and Aristotle repeatedly declared that man is intelligence (*nous*), that intelligence is the divine element (*theion*) present in man and that God is essentially intelligence.<sup>12</sup> In short, according to Paul, the Greek philosophers, by reason alone, had been able to formulate a concept of God that was much more advanced than that of popular religion based on myth, and this is the God he announces to the Athenians.

However, this is only the first part of Paul's discourse. The author of the Acts refers to the second part more briefly but there is no reason to assume that it was less important. Indeed, after mentioning the 'times of ignorance', i.e. the time when men did not know the true God, Paul declares that the time has come for all people everywhere, that is, not only Jews, but also

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, n. 36.

<sup>11</sup> *Acts* 17, 29.

<sup>12</sup> In the last remaining fragment of the lost dialogue *On prayer* Aristotle said that "God is intelligence (*nous*) or something higher than intelligence itself" (*Aristotelis Fragmenta selecta*, ed. D.W. Ross, Oxford 1955, p. 57.

Greeks, to repent (*metanoein*), i.e., change their way of thinking, in short, to recognize the true God. At this point he explicitly presents the Christian message, i.e. that God has appointed a man to judge the earth with justice, 'and he has provided confirmation for all by raising him from the dead'.<sup>13</sup> The brevity of these words is not enough to conceal their meaning: the man appointed by God is clearly Jesus, whom he had already mentioned at the beginning of his speech; the reference to resurrection, also mentioned at the beginning of the text, attests His divinity; the task assigned to Him, 'to judge the earth with justice' refers to redemption. It is the whole Christian message, revealed to all men, but acceptable only through faith. The first path of evangelization, which went from reason to faith, now follows the second path, from faith to reason.

The author relates the listeners' reaction to that announcement as follows: 'When they heard about resurrection of the dead, some began to scoff, but others said, "We should like to hear you on this some other time". [...] But some did join him, and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the Court of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and others with them'.<sup>14</sup> This passage is usually interpreted as a sign of the failure of Paul's discourse, and thus implicitly of the type of evangelization adopted by him in this circumstance. But a careful reading shows that the text does not say that. The text speaks of a division among the listeners, produced by the announcement of the resurrection, that is, the divinity of Jesus. In fact, the concept of resurrection, as we said earlier, was totally alien to Greek culture, and as such was met by some with derision.

However, the text says that this was the reaction of 'some' (*hoi men ... hoi de*), and then adds that 'some' others (*tines*) believed, thus giving the impression of the audience being divided into two groups which, although not quantitatively characterized, are however represented in the same way: 'some ... some'. The believers include a member of the Areopagus, Dionysius, that is, an important figure, presumably of great learning and authority, and a woman named Damaris, i.e. a person who was at the opposite end of the Greek social hierarchy, with no importance or culture. The author probably makes these remarks to indicate the variety of those who believed, and therefore the universality of the accession to faith. There is no reason to believe that Paul's speech was a failure.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–34.

Indeed, it brings together two alternative and complementary ways of presenting religion, one that goes from reason to faith and one that goes from faith to reason. The first, as St. Thomas says, must precede the second: 'Faith cannot altogether precede understanding, for it would be impossible to assent by believing what is proposed to be believed, without understanding it in some way'.<sup>15</sup> This means that starting from reason does not serve to inspire faith, as many think, but only to make people understand the truths of faith, i.e. to show that they are not absurd, i.e. impossible. Resurrection, for example, would be absurd without a God who, having created the world, is omnipotent and therefore can also raise people from the dead. The path that starts from reason, therefore, does not compel us to believe, as proven by the fact that some did not believe Paul, although they presumably shared his appeals to the god of philosophers, who was their god, the god of the Greek philosophers. This path, however, allows one to believe, clears the field of any possible obstacle to faith and opens, as it were, a space for faith, as evidenced by the fact that some others, after hearing the specifically Christian message, the appeal to faith, believed.

Everything becomes clearer for those who adhere to faith: they understand why God created the world, why He set an order that was a sign of His power, why He created man in His image, and why He wanted to redeem man of ignorance, sin and death through the death and resurrection of His only begotten Son, true man and true God at the same time. Thus, as St Thomas always says: 'the perfection of understanding follows the virtue of faith: which perfection of understanding is itself followed by a kind of certainty of faith'.<sup>16</sup>

Since the first route is based on reason, which is possessed by everyone, it is in a way binding for everyone, even if not everyone is then willing to use reason or knows how to use it properly. Proof of this is the fact that the Greek philosophers managed to attain it without the help of any revelation. The Greek philosophers, in fact, came to conceive of a God, creator and lord of heaven and earth, and a man who is intelligence, i.e. spirit, who can be considered divine offspring, i.e., created by God in His likeness. Today this path consists in showing that reason, constituted mainly by science, does not deem

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 8, a. 8 ad 2um: *Fides non potest universaliter praecedere intellectum, non enim posset homo assentire credendo aliquibus propositis nisi ea aliquantulum intelligeret.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: *Sed perfectio intellectus consequitur fidem quae est virtus, ad quam quidem intellectus perfectionem sequitur quaedam fidei certitudo.*

absurd, i.e., impossible, the content of faith and that it is perfectly compatible with it, although it is unable to prove it because it is beyond its capacity.

Since the second path is based on faith, it logically presupposes the first – not necessarily in chronological order – since faith would not be possible unless one had the concept of an absolute, transcendent and omnipotent God. But this path is the result of free choice, because faith is an act of freedom. It is not required by reason, because after admitting the existence of an absolute and transcendent God – as many in fact admit today – one might not believe that He has saved men through His Son – as many today do not believe. However, faith is made possible by reason, that is, it is shown as not impossible, not absurd, not irrational, as it would be if reason were to demonstrate that there is no transcendent God and that the world can be explained entirely by itself. The complementarity of the two alternative paths perhaps reveals a new additional meaning of the saying of the Gospel ‘the truth shall make you free’,<sup>17</sup> because if reason is used to arrive at the truth, it makes possible that act of true freedom which is faith.

<sup>17</sup> *Jn* 8, 32.