

Chapter 5

The Great Synthesis

Early Setting

When the Christian ground-motive entered the Hellenistic, late-Greek world of thought, its indivisible unity was threatened on every side. Already in the first centuries of its history, the Christian church fought a battle of life and death in order to keep its ground-motive free from the influences of the Greek ground-motive and the ones that later intermingled with Greek religion in its contact with the different near-eastern religions, notably Persian Zoroastrianism.

All of these nonbiblical ground-motives were of a dualistic nature, divided against themselves. Torn by an inner conflict, they knew neither God the Creator, the absolute origin of all things, nor humankind in the root of its being. This is the case because they opted for an apostate direction.

We have discussed the Greek form-matter motive at some length in previous chapters. It originated in an unreconciled conflict within Greek religious consciousness between the older nature religion and the newer culture religion of the Olympian gods.

We have demonstrated in an earlier context how the *matter motive* served as the spiritual motive power in the older religions of nature. The religions deified the eternal flux of life as it originated from “mother earth.” This stream of life was impersonal and without any form. Whatever was born from it in an individual form and shape was doomed to decline, in order to allow the cyclic movement of birth, maturation, passing away, and rebirth to continue in the whole of “nature” without interruption. In this process of the “machine-work of births” no rational calculable order governs since it is controlled by *blind fate*, by the dreadful *Anangkē*.

As we have seen, the *form motive*, by contrast, finds its origin in the younger culture religion of the Greeks, which deified the cultural powers of Greek society. Since this motive oriented itself to the cultural aspect of temporal reality (which is characterized by the shaping of a given material according to a free rational design), these deities became the gods of form, measure, and harmony. They left “mother earth” from whose womb the

eternally flowing stream of life originates. They acquired their seat on the mountain of Olympus where they were raised to become radiant form gods with a super-sensory (invisible) form and shape, elevated above the fate of mortals, free from all influences of the earthly matter principle. But then, as mere culture gods, they did not have any power over the fate of mortals. The matter motive of the older religion of life remains the opposing power directed against the form motive.

The ground-motive which governed the entire Greek world of ideas thus exhibited two faces which, as it were, looked at each other with hostility. The *matter motive* had its foundation in the deification and absolutization of organic development (the biotic aspect of life of created reality); the *form motive*, by contrast, had its foundation in a deification of the *cultural aspect* of created reality, in a deification of human culture.

The spiritual momentum of this internally divided ground-motive led mature Greek thought to accept a twofold origin of the world. Even when Greek thinkers acknowledged the existence of a cosmic order originating through a divine design and plan, they still categorically denied a divine *creation*. Greeks believed that whatever came into existence arose merely through a divine activity of giving form to an already present and formless matter. They conceived of divine formation only in terms of human cultural activity. The [111] “rational deity” was merely a “heavenly architect” who formed a given material according to a free design. This deity was not able to forestall the blind, autonomous activity of the matter principle.

A dualistic conception of human nature was directly related to this dualistic idea of divine nature. Yet, as we have already seen, a person’s self-knowledge depends upon knowledge of God. Just as the rational deity found the autonomy of the matter principle over against itself, human nature found within itself the basic duality of a “rational soul” and an earthly “material body.” According to the Greek understanding the actual center of the rational soul was theoretical thought, which was divine in character. The soul was the invisible “form” of human existence, and in its theoretical thought capacity it was immortal. By contrast, the material body, the “matter” of a person’s being, was subject to the stream of life and blind fate.

In the Hellenistic period it was not difficult to combine the Greek ground-motive with the dualistic ground-motives of the near-eastern religions with which the Greeks had already made acquaintance. The ground-motive of the Persian Zoroastrian religion consisted of a battle between a divine principle of light and an evil principle of darkness. Thus one could easily identify the Greek form motive with the Zoroastrian motive of light and the Greek matter motive with the evil principle of darkness.

The Temptation of Dualism

The Christian church realized the enormous danger which the Greek-Zoroastrian ground-motive posed for the pure ground-motive of divine revelation. In its life-and-death struggle against this motive the church formulated the doctrine of the divine essential unity of the Father and the Son (the Word or *Logos*) and soon afterwards the doctrine of the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This determination of the basic doctrinal position of the Christian church was not intended as a scientific-theological theory but as a necessarily imperfect formulation of the living confession of the Body of Christ, in which the pure ground-motive sought expression. Specifically, these creedal formulations broke the dangerous influence of Gnosticism during the early centuries of the Christian church, so that a purely scriptural point of departure for theology was restored.

Under the influence of the Greek and near-eastern dualism the unbreakable unity of the ground-motive of the Divine Word-revelation, that of creation, fall, and redemption through Christ Jesus and the communion of the Holy Spirit, was broken apart. A schism was introduced between creation and redemption, between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. In the spirit of Greek philosophy the speculative theoretical knowledge of God, the *gnosis*, [112] was elevated above the faith of the Christian congregation.

Particularly through maintaining the unbreakable unity of the Old and the New Testament the Christian church during this period managed under God's guidance to conquer the religious dualism accompanying this gnosticism in its attempt to create a split between *creation* and *redemption*. Yet, we shall see how the Greek ground-motive in a hidden way continued to exert its influence within Christian thinking.¹

We have seen how the Christian church, as soon as the gospel entered into the the Greek world of thought, got involved in a battle of life and death against the ground-motive of Greek culture, which threatened to overpower the biblical ground-motive.

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¹ *General Editor's note:* The subsequent five paragraphs, owing to the nature of the original series of articles, partially overlap with the preceding three.

Gnosticism. The apostle John had already been forced to warn against one of the forerunners of “Christian Gnosticism,” the sect of the Nicolaitans.

But also outside this cricle, amongst the so-called apostolic church fathers, who had set out to defend the Christian religion against Greek thought, the influence of the Greek ground-motive was evident.

The Greek church fathers in particular conceived of creation as being the result of the divine activity of giving form to matter. Therefore, since they could not consider matter itself to be divine, they did not want to fully acknowledge that the Word, through which all things were created and which became flesh in Jesus Christ, is synonymous with God. Accordingly, they degraded the Word (the Logos) to a “semigod” who, as “mediator” of creation, stood between God and creature. And also in this context the speculative theoretical knowledge of God, elaborated in a philosophical theology, was positioned above the faith of the church community.

Accordingly the Christian religion, in a precarious fashion, was seen as a higher moral theory. Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross was pushed to the background in favor of the idea of a “divine teacher” who advocated a higher moral walk of life.

In this way the Christian religion, through the operation of the Greek ground-motive, was robbed of its indivisible and radical character.

Under the mask of a higher theoretical knowledge of God a view was introduced which superficialized the Word-revelation into a “higher ethical doctrine.”

Neither creation, nor the fall, nor redemption were understood in their scriptural meaning. Even after the Christian church established the doctrine of the Trinity the influence of the Greek religious ground-motive continued in the thought of the church fathers.

Augustine

The orthodox direction of Christian thought reached a high point in Augustine. Augustine placed his stamp on Christian reflection until well into the thirteenth century and even afterwards he maintained a considerable influence. The ground-motive of his thought was undoubtedly scriptural. After his conversion his powerful, talented intellect increasingly drew from this source. However, the Christian theology of his day was confronted with philosophical problems which cried out for solutions. Insofar as the church fathers had been philosophically educated – Augustine very much so – they had come to absorb the Greek way of thought. They had appropriated its views of cosmic order, [113] human nature, and human society. The church fathers attempted to rid these conceptions of their pagan elements and to adapt them to the Christian religion. However, they failed to see that these elements were rooted in

a pagan ground-motive. They failed to understand that this ground-motive controlled not merely a few components but its entire foundation and elaboration. In other words, they failed to see that because of its radical character the ground-motive of the Christian religion demands an *inner reformation* of one's scientific view of the world order and of temporal life. Instead of *reformation* they sought *accommodation*; they sought to adapt pagan thought to divine revelation of the Word.

This adaptation laid the basis for *scholasticism*, which even up to the present has continued to impede the development of a truly reformational direction in Christian life and thought. Scholasticism seeks a *synthesis* between Greek thought and the Christian religion. It was thought that such a synthesis could be successfully achieved if philosophy, with its Greek basis, were to be made subservient to Christian theology.

Here again Augustine played a key role. He denied the autonomy of philosophy, that is, its independence with respect to the Christian faith. For he saw clearly that the Christian faith must give guidance also to philosophic thought, for without this guidance it would be dominated by an apostate faith. As such this idea was utterly scriptural. However, Augustine's search for accommodation and synthesis led him to work this out in an unacceptable way. Philosophy, not intrinsically reformed, was not allowed to develop itself independently but had to be subjected to the control of dogmatic theology. Philosophical questions could be treated only within a theological frame of reference. Augustine attempted to christianize philosophy along these lines, as if theological theory and the Christian religion were identical.

One cannot deny that Augustine was influenced by the Greek conception of contemplative theory, which presented itself as the path toward the true knowledge of God. Earlier, Aristotle had elevated metaphysics (philosophical theory of first principles, which culminated in "theology" or the philosophical knowledge of God) to the "queen of the sciences." She was to "enslave" all other sciences, who would never be allowed to contradict her. Augustine merely replaced this Greek notion of "philosophical theology" with Christian theology, as the scientific theory concerning Christian doctrines.

Augustine did accept the ground-motive of revelation in its purity. But he could not develop it radically because the Greek ground-motive, transmitted by Greek philosophy, placed a firm hold upon his entire worldview. For example, he read the creation account with Greek eyes. According to him "the earth without form or void" signified still unformed [114] "matter," although in opposition to the Greek notion he believed that this matter was created by God. Likewise, he conceived of the relation between the "soul" and the "body" within the framework of the Greek ground-motive. For him the soul was an immortal substance char-

acterized by the faculty of theoretical thought. The body was merely a “material vehicle” of the rational soul. The divine revelation of the religious root-unity of human existence was thus again undermined by Greek dualism.

Especially in his doctrine of “original sin” the Greek matter motive exerted a dangerous practical impact on Augustine’s entire view of life. For Augustine “original sin” was sexual desire. Marriage was merely a therapeutic device to control unbounded lust after the flesh. Unfortunately, this view has crippled Christian marital ethics for centuries. As a rule, Christians did not see that original sin is seated in the heart and not in a temporal, natural drive. The sexual drive was viewed as sinful, and sexual abstinence was applauded as a higher Christian virtue. But this asceticism is not scriptural; its lineage reaches back to Plato, who explained sensual drives in terms of the ominous principle of matter. At the same time, Augustine did defend the scriptural teaching of the radical fall. He understood the depravity that lies at the root of human nature.

The example of Augustine clearly demonstrates how even in a great father of the church the spiritual power of the Greek ground-motive worked as a dangerous counterforce to the ground-motive of revelation. It is not right to conceal this out of love and respect for Augustine. Insight into matters where Augustine should not be followed need not detract from our love and respect for him. It is an urgent matter that we, openly and regardless of who is involved, choose sides in the issue: *reformation* or *accommodation*. This question dominates Christian life today. Only the ground-motive of God’s revelation can furnish us with the appropriate answer.

The Roman Catholic Ground-Motive

The effort to bridge the foundations of the Christian religion and Greek thought had to lead over time to the further attempt to find a deeper reconciliation between their respective religious ground-motives. During the Middle Ages, when the church of Rome gradually gained control over all of temporal society, this attempted religious synthesis produced a new dialectical ground-motive in the development of western culture: the well-known motive of “nature and grace” (nature and supernature). Its inherent ambiguity and disharmony dominated even the thought of [115] the Reformation to a great extent, although the Reformation had overcome its dialectical tension in principle by returning to the scriptural teaching of the radical significance of the fall for human nature and to the confession of justification by faith alone.

The Impact of Greek Thought

How did Roman Catholicism conceive of “nature?” It derived its concept of nature from Greek philosophy. As we saw earlier, the Greek

view of “nature” (*physis*) was entirely determined by the religious motive of matter and form. The matter motive lay at the foundation of the older nature religions which deified a formless, eternally flowing stream of earthly life. Whatever possessed individual form arose from this stream and then passed away. By contrast, the form motive controlled the more recent Greek culture religion, which granted the gods an invisible, imperishable, and rational form that was supranatural in character.

Aristotle listed the various meanings of the word *physis* in Greek thought in chapter four of the fifth book of his famous *Metaphysics*. In his account, the ancient concept of “nature” alternated between a formless stream of becoming and decay (the matter principle) to an imperishable and invisible form, which was understood as the enduring essence of perishable things. For Aristotle, who gave religious priority to the form principle, the second meaning was the most authentic. He defined “nature” as the “substantial form of things which in themselves possess a principle of movement (becoming, growth, and maturation).” In this way he sought to reconcile the principles of form and matter.

Aristotle’s Greek view of nature was pagan. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic ground-motive of nature and grace sought to accommodate the Greek ground-motive to that of divine revelation. The scholastics argued that whatever was subject to birth and death, including human beings, was constituted of matter and form. God created all things according to this arrangement. As a *natural* being, for example, they held that a person consists of a “rational soul” and a “material body.” Characterized by its capacity for thought, the rational soul was both the “invisible, essential form” of the body and an imperishable “substance” that could exist apart from the body.

Moreover, scholasticism maintained that when God created humankind he furnished it with a “supranatural” gift of grace, a suprahuman faculty of thought and will by which a person could remain in a correct relationship with God. Humankind lost this gift at the fall, and as a result it was reduced to mere “human nature” with its inherent weaknesses. But this human “nature,” which is guided by the natural light of reason, was not [116] corrupted by sin and thus also does not need to be restored by Christ. Human nature is only “weakened” by the fall. It continues to remain true to its innate “natural law” and possesses an autonomy, a relative independence and self-determination in opposition to the realm of grace of the Christian religion. Nature is only brought to a higher form of perfection by grace, which comes from Christ and reaches nature through the mediation of the institutional church. This grace must be earned and prepared by good works in the realm of nature.

Clearly, this new religious ground-motive conflicts with the motive of creation, fall, and redemption at every point. It introduces an internal split

into the creation motive by setting up a distinction between the natural and the supernatural and by restricting the scope of fall and redemption to the supernatural. This restriction robs the scriptural ground-motive of its integral and radical character. Broken by the counterforce that “accommodated” the Greek nature motive to the creation motive, the scriptural motive could no longer grip a person with all its power and absoluteness.

One consequence of this dualistic tendency was that the scholastic teaching on the relation between the soul and the body left no room for insight into the radical meaning of either the fall or redemption in Jesus Christ. If the human soul is not the spiritual root-unity of a person’s *whole* temporal existence but consists of “the rational form of a material body,” then how could one speak of the corruption of a person in the very root of that person’s nature? Sin arises not from the function of thought but from the heart, from the religious root of our being.

Like the Greek form-matter motive, the ground-motive of nature and grace contained a *religious dialectic* which drove life and thought from the natural pole to the supernatural pole. The naturalistic attitude summoned the ecclesiastical truths of grace before the court of natural reason, and supernatural mysticism attempted to escape “nature” in the mystical experience of “grace.” Ultimately this dialectic led to a consistent proclamation of an unbridgeable rift between nature and grace; nature became independent, losing every point of contact with grace. Only the official authority of the Roman Catholic Church was sufficiently powerful to uphold the religious pseudo-synthesis by formally denouncing the heresies that openly tried to make this entry using this very ground-motive. Its defence drew heavily on the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas [1225-1274], the prince of scholasticism.

Thomas Aquinas

For Thomas “nature” was the independent “stepping-stone to grace,” the substructure of a Christian superstructure. He construed the mutual [117] relation between these antithetical motives in Greek fashion, understanding it as a relation between “matter” and “form.” He believed that nature is matter for a higher form of perfection bestowed upon it by grace. In other words, the Redeemer works in the manner of a sculptor who shapes his material into a new form.

But it is evident that this construction, derived from Aristotle, could not truly reconcile the inherently antinomic motives of nature and grace. Real reconciliation would have been possible only if a higher standpoint had been found that could have transcended and encompassed both motives. However, such a higher motive was and is not available. To the Church of Rome today “grace” is not “everything,” for otherwise grace would “swallow up” nature. But does this state of affairs not testify that the Roman Catholic ground-motive was not that of God’s Word? Is it not clear

that the nature motive diverged significantly from the creation motive of scriptural revelation?

Surely, the Roman Catholic Church did not incorporate the Greek ground-motive into its own view of nature without revision. Since the church could not accept a dual origin of the cosmos, it tried to harmonize the Greek motive with the scriptural motive of creation. For Roman Catholicism it no longer meant the acceptance of a twofold origin of the world, as it did for the Greeks, for in that case *creation* would have been lost.

One of the first consequences of this accommodation was that the form-matter motive lost its original religious meaning. But because of its pretended reconciliation with the Greek nature motive, Roman Catholicism robbed the biblical creation motive of its scope.

To the Greek mind neither the matter of the world nor the invisible pure form could have been created. At best one could admit that the *union* of form and matter was made possible by divine reason, the divine architect who formed the available material. According to Thomas, though, the medieval doctor of the church, the concrete matter of perishable beings was created simultaneously with their concrete form. However, neither the *matter principle* (the principle of endless becoming and decay) nor the *pure principle of form* (the principle of perfection) were created. He held that they are the two metaphysical principles of all perishable existence. As to their origin, Thomas was silent.

Thomas also maintained that the principle of matter was the principle of imperfection, arguing that what “comes into being” is still imperfect. But how is it possible that a principle of imperfection finds its origin in God? Conversely, he continually called the “thinking soul,” the “rational form” of human nature, “divine.” He never referred to matter as divine. Clearly, the Greek form-matter motive led to a dualism in Thomas’s conception of the creation, a dualism reinforced by the contrast between nature and supernature. Unintentionally, Thomas allowed the Greek form-matter motive to overpower the creation motive of the Christian [118] religion. Although he did acknowledge God as the “first cause” and the “ultimate goal” of nature, he divided the creation order into a natural and supernatural realm. And his view of the “natural order” stemmed from Aristotle.

The Pretended Biblical Basis

Roman Catholic thinkers believe that the contrast between nature and grace is biblically based. They appeal in particular to Romans 1:19-20 and 2:14-15. We are obliged to consider these texts in detail, beginning with Romans 1:19-20, where we read:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible na-