

The beginning of the first century AD marked the beginning of a significant era in the history of mankind. It marked the beginning of the Christian Era. By the end of the first century, Christianity had become a small force in the western scene, but most Christians were still Jews who lived in Syria. The first few centuries of Christendom were marked by severe persecutions by the Romans. Most of the Roman Emperors before Constantine in the early 300's AD were intolerant of the Christians. Controversy arose in the church about who should be in charge of it. Questions arose concerning the doctrine of the church. Christians believed in only one God - the perfect creator of the universe. They also believed that God became man and that it is possible to see, hear, and speak with God as one man speaks to another. Much of the western world in that day believed in the Platonic philosophy that God was the Supreme good and the Creator, but they could not believe God actually became man and taught the people of Palestine.

There seem to be three major trends or questions involved in the development of Christianity from its beginnings to the medieval times. First, there were those theologians who preferred the traditional view of Christianity as opposed to those who favored to combine or interpret Christian doctrines with philosophy. Second, among the theologians who combined philosophy and Christianity, there were those who favored the ideas of Plato, those who favored the ideas of neo-Platonism, and those who favored the ideas of Aristotle. Finally, four basic questions were pondered by these theologians: 1. The nature of God, 2. The Creation of the universe, 3. The nature of the Soul, and 4. How does Logic compare to God's omnipotence and power to do miracles? Clement, Origen, Tertullian, Augustine, Avicenna, Averros, Roger Bacon, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and others all provided answers to these questions.

During the second and third centuries, Clement, who was followed by Origen, ran a cataclysmic school in Alexandria. At the time, Christianity was not looked very highly upon by scholars. They saw Christians as being dependent on Faith and submission to God instead of Logic. Clement responded to these philosophers by writing a textbook which proceeded to make Christianity "intellectually respectable." Through Clement and the subsequent work of Origen, Christianity became more widely accepted among the western civilizations. Arius adds to their work by claiming that Jesus was not really God in the flesh. This satisfied two things. First, it reconciled Christianity with the Platonic view that God is the ultimate good and does not have a body. Second, Arius' ideas made Christianity even more respectable among the learned, who believed in the Platonic view of God. There was opposition to their work, however.

Tertullian argued that Greek Stoic and Platonic philosophy should not be mixed with religion at all. In fact, he totally denounced philosophy as heretical. Tertullian was an example of someone who took the extreme traditional view of Christianity. To Tertullian, philosophy had nothing and should not have anything to do with Christian theology. One phrase attributed to Tertullian was, "What does Athens [Greek philosophy] have to do with Jerusalem [Christianity]."

Eventually, there came to be two fundamental questions relating to Christianity. First, how can three people (the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) be one God? Second, how can one person (Jesus) have 2 natures? Arius took the stand that Jesus was not God, while Athanasius took the stand that the Son was God. Although these questions were eventually resolved in favor of Athanasius at the council of Nicea in 325 AD under the direction of the Roman emperor Constantine, the Christian thought switched back and forth from Arius' to Athanasius' views for the next couple of centuries. All the Bishops of the Church at the time accepted the decision except two, who are exiled. After this point, Rome became Christian.

This brings us to the time of Augustine (354 - 430 AD), a North African who had a huge impact on medieval Christian and philosophic thought. Augustine, upon hearing the popular Bishop Ambrose, became totally converted to Christianity. Augustine swore celibacy and became a great Bishop and the greatest doctrinal authority on Christianity at the time. Augustine viewed Greek philosophy as the handmaiden of religion. To Augustine, natural philosophy could contribute to the proper interpretation of scripture and to the development of Christian doctrine. Because Stoic and Platonic philosophy was most compatible with Christianity, (though not completely compatible) Augustine tended to use these ideas to form his doctrine of "Platonic Christianity." Augustine's doctrine of Christianity lasted and had great impact throughout the middle ages into the late middle ages. In addition, philosophy played an important role in shaping the doctrine of Christianity.

Throughout much of the middle ages, monasteries were established, providing places of retreat from the world for people who wanted to pursue holiness. Some monasteries became not only places of worship, but schools which used the work of natural philosophy in their curriculum. The monastery of Vivarum, founded by Cassiodorus, was a good example. In this monastery, translations were made from Greek to Latin and the study, even of pagan authors, became a central part of the learning of this monastery. The monasteries on the middle ages largely drew from the theology of Augustine and preserved and transmitted his doctrine as well as the ideas of natural philosophy.

Then, in about the year 1000 AD, a great change began to occur in the ideas of western Christian theology. It was at this time that Avicenna, a Muslim, and later the Spanish Muslim Averros, presented versions of Aristotelian philosophy. Avicenna's commentaries on Aristotle, which combined Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy, became very popular to the Christian world towards the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries. About 1230, Avicenna's commentaries began to be displaced by those of Averros. Averros taught a less Platonized version of Aristotelian philosophy and became widely accepted among medieval scholars. However, Averros' ideas of more pure Aristotelian philosophy conflicted with the ideas of Christian theology at the time. One conflict between Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology was that Aristotle did not believe in a Beginning or Creation of the Universe. In

Aristotle's view, the universe had always existed and would always continue to exist. Secondly, Aristotle's philosophy and theology differed on ideas about the nature of the human soul. Third, the views of Aristotle and Christians conflicted over the nature of God. Finally, they differed about what force ruled the universe: Logic vs. the Omniscience and Miraculous power of God.

One way Aristotle's ideas were controlled were through bans placed on Aristotle's works by Bishops in 1213 and 1215, Pope Gregory in 1231, and later bans by Bishop Etienne Tempier of Paris in 1270 and 1277.

Another significant development, however, was that of Comparing and using the ideas of Aristotle to serve as a handmaiden to Christian doctrine, just as the ideas of Plato had been incorporated into Christianity 800 years before by Augustine and others. Among those who influenced this line of thought were the Englishman Roger Bacon (ca. 1220-1292), the German Albert the Great (ca. 1200-1280), and perhaps the most important of all, Thomas Aquinas of Italy, a disciple of Albert.

First was Roger Bacon, who had an innovative way of reconciling Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology. In the 1240's, he was one of the first to lecture in Paris on the works of Aristotle. His major scientific writings were attempts to persuade the Christian church hierarchy to embrace all of natural philosophy. To Bacon, the sciences were extremely useful as a tool that can prove and establish the Faith. Bacon used the ideas of Augustine to back up his idea that philosophy was truly God given. He felt that any conflict between philosophy and the Faith came from either faulty translation or ignorant interpretation of the writings.

In the middle of the thirteenth century came two of the greatest Christian-Aristotelian theologians - Albert the Great and his pupil Thomas Aquinas. Both Thomas and Albert studied theology in Paris and Cologne, as well as various other places. Albert became a master of theology in 1245, while Thomas obtained his theological Doctorate in 1256. Between the two of them, a huge corpus of ideas on Aristotelian philosophy and Christian philosophy was poured out. As Lindberg says, Albert was "the man who put western Christendom in touch with the Aristotelian tradition."(p. 230)

Albert attempted, but was not able, to fully reconcile the differences between Aristotelian philosophy and Christendom. He was not able to reconcile the differences between Aristotle's idea that the universe is eternal and the Christian view of the Creation of the universe. But he finally came to the idea that an eternal universe was philosophically absurd and that this matter could be settled without theological assistance. Also, Albert reconciled the Christian doctrine of the immortal soul with the Platonic philosophy that the soul was a spiritual and immortal substance, separable from the body. Finally, Albert felt that, although God is ultimately the cause of everything, He normally works through natural causes to accomplish its purposes.

Thomas used much of Albert's doctrine and expanded on it, almost perfectly defining the relationship which should exist between philosophy and Christianity. He taught that "what is divinely taught to us by faith cannot be contrary to what we are endowed with by nature."(Lindberg, p.232) So according to Thomas, Aristotelian logic would always be compatible with the Christian truths given by revelation. To Thomas, both religion and science were strongholds of truth and knowledge. Science was almost more than just a handmaiden to religion - more than just something that could only explain or prove religion. Through natural philosophy, a person could understand the order of the universe - the rotation of the planets and causes of their rotation, for example. In addition, philosophy could 1. Demonstrate the reality of God's existence, 2. Illustrate truths by analogies from the natural world, and 3. Disprove any objections to the Faith.

Thomas confronted and reconciled all the differences between Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology. First, he argued that it was not a contradiction to say that the universe was created and that it had also existed eternally. Second, Thomas agreed with Aristotle on the nature of the soul. He added that the soul had a spherical form which made it capable of independent existence from the body. The soul was therefore eternal. He believed and proved that this was compatible with Aristotelian philosophy. Finally, Thomas was able to solve the problem between Aristotelian logic and the Christian faith in the omnipotence of God. He did this by merging Aristotelian and Christian ideas to form one general world view. He corrected Aristotle where needed and incorporated portions of his natural philosophy into Christianity, thus creating a religion compatible with Aristotelian philosophy. According to Thomas, God worked through natural laws, but we still had freedom to choose our destiny. That God was the power that ruled the universe could be proven by both logic and revelation. Much later, the ideas of Thomas came to represent the ideas of the whole Catholic church.

So we can see the great movements and changes on the doctrine of Christianity in the west. First, there were always those who favored the traditional view of Christianity. By the conservative theologians of his day, Thomas was seen as a dangerous radical. Second, among the philosophers, we can see a great movement from the "Platonic Christianity" of Augustine to the "Aristotelian Christianity" of Thomas and Albert. Finally, we see that, in the end, Thomas was able to reconcile all the differences between Christianity and Aristotelianism, explaining the creation of the universe, the nature of the soul, and how logic compared with God's omnipotence and power to perform miracles.