I. Introduction

A. If Christianity were to avoid complete intellectualization (as in Gnosticism), a philosophy of theology that preserved the importance of revelation.

1. The idea of revelation was not clear during the first centuries of Christianity.

2. The church is considered the steward of revelation, guarding, preserving, and forwarding it according to its interpretation.

3. The identification of revelation with scripture had not yet been asserted. The church creates the Bible, not vice-versa.

4. Thus, the idea of verbal plenary inspiration was not yet formed

B. Philosophy and theology, then, are placed in relation to each other, theology is given the primary role over philosophy.

1. The relation between philosophy and theology has a long history during the first 13 centuries of the church: Philo, Clement and Origen (2nd and 3rd centuries), Augustine, Boethius, and middle age thinkers culminating in Aquinas.

2. The historical development of relational thinking in regard to these two subjects does not imply that the direction is always toward the idea that philosophy’s role is to defend and forward theological thinking as the “final truth”.

II. Philo of Alexandria (25 BC to 50 AD)

A. Philo, a Jew, viewed the eclectic Greek philosophy of his day as hinting at revealed truth (some believed Greek thinkers had met Moses).

B. But he also distinguished between truths gained by human wisdom and truths as revealed in the Law of Moses.

C. He held, however, that Divine wisdom as revealed truth is of a higher Order than human wisdom, though the latter is continuous and
reconcilable with the former.

1. Philosophy is, thus, the “handmaid” of theology. It functions to:
   a. Explicate the meaning of religion (by seeing scripture as “allegorical”)
   b. Defend religion against skeptical attacks (e.g., by rational proofs for God’s existence).
   c. The liberal arts were once the handmaid of philosophy, and now philosophy is the handmaid of theology.

2. Human and Divine wisdom both come from God, so there can be no contradiction between the Mosaic Law and philosophy
   a. The harmony of philosophy and religion enables philosophy to interpret religion.
   b. Texts that seem to be at variance with the truth can be given a non-literal interpretation, an allegorical one.
   c. The true sense of scripture is whatever does not conflict with human reason. Reason cannot tell us in a positive sense what the meaning of a text is but can tell us what it is not.
   d. Philosophy serves theology on the latter’s terms

III. The Christian Platonists

A. The 2nd and 3rd century Christians needed to see philosophy and Religion in relation to each other:

1. The pseudo-philosophical religion of Gnosticism was challenging Christianity, arguing that Christianity was incoherent and irrational.

2. Christians needed to show that they did not believe that all doctrines of the faith had to be accepted only on faith.

3. Christians were themselves producing scholars schooled in Greek philosophy who wanted to utilize philosophical thought in service of explicating Christian doctrine.
4. Justin Martyr (d. 164) asserted that Christ incarnate is the full truth that philosophy grasps only partially.

5. Clement of Alexandria sees Christianity as fulfilling the dim and partial intuitions of Platonism. Philosophy strains at what is revealed by faith in Christ. But the day will come when this faith becomes knowledge in the next life.

6. God helps us to find him by revelation, while the search is philosophical. Plato’s knowledge of God was imperfect. God sends the Logos as truth incarnate, which the logos of which Plato speaks cannot be easily known or ever communicated. (Origen, 3rd cent.).

B. In these centuries those like Origen tended not only to use non-literal means to explain unclear passages but also to use philosophical language to explain or, indeed, translate the meaning of clear passages.

IV. Augustine on Faith and Reason

A. Aug. can be broadly characterized as offering a neo-Platonic religious Intellectualism.

B. Reason has two functions:

1. It precedes faith, clarifying issues in ways that enable us to come to faith.

2. It is a tool of reason for clarifying and developing the doctrines of faith.

3. In respect to matters of faith, we believe in order to know. “Credo ut intelligam”.

C. Aug. does not make the later distinction between the order of nature and the order of grace, and he supposes that a mind of purified will can know God by reason.

1. He uses Platonic philosophy to explain Christian doctrine, and

2. he uses reason to prove the existence of God.

D. If we must believe God in order to understand him, we nonetheless can achieve much knowledge by reason even before faith takes hold. Reason apprehends eternal and unchangeable truth.
V. Philosophy and Theology in the Middle Ages

A. Texts of Aristotle are recovered during the early middle ages, and Aristotle has a profound influence in theological thinking.

1. Abelard (1079-1121) is first to use the word “theology” for the explication of the data of faith (previously the term was used by Aristotle as describing “natural theology”).

   a. Abelard gives philosophy the role of:

      1.1 Refuting the objections of philosophers to the faith

      2.2 Understanding the meaning of scripture

      3.3 Giving rational support to doctrines

   b. Abelard believes that theological faith is primary and most important and that faith cannot be based upon human arguments, though reason can clarify what is believed.

2. Anselm of Bec (1033-1109) also gives primacy to faith, but he believes that philosophical arguments can prove the existence of God.

   a. The nonbeliever can be brought to faith by rational arguments, especially those who have no background of faith.

   b. A system of natural theology is prior to faith.

   c. Most important medieval theologians following Anselm accept his development of the relation between theology (faith) and philosophy.

   d. This rather acceptable relational concept is, however, disturbed by the problem of how the contingent facts of history can be turned into universal truths.

3. Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) adds to this development as a Jewish thinker about the Law the understanding that philosophy does not offer anything positive in terms of doctrine but rather shows what it is not impossible to believe.
a. Thus, some philosophical doctrines have logical consequences that make faith impossible and thus should be excluded.

b. Others, however, support faith and make faith possible. When reason shows that a doctrine of faith is true, then it is necessarily true.

c. For the most part, however, philosophy simply shows the non-impossibility of doctrines of the faith

B. We can ask, however, what to do about real conflict between faith and our theology. How do we know that there is a real conflict if what is “true” theologically is what is rationally true? The medieval position thus far does not solve this problem. Faith seems to be logically dependent upon reason. Is philosophy a handmaid any longer?

VI. Thomas Aquinas

A. Aquinas, reacting to the “Latin Averroism” of his day, which argued that no doctrine other than philosophy was necessary, asserts that scripture is inspired by God and, thus, is not a work of human reason.

B. Some truths are known by reason, some theological truths (e.g., the existence of God, which Thomas proves “5 ways”) can be known by but some theological truths cannot be known by reason and must be revealed.

1. Salvation is needed by all men, but few can understand the arguments for God’s existence. Yet we must know the basic truths about God and salvation in order to be saved. So, revelation is essential.

2. What I know by reason I do not know by faith. Thus, Aquinas distinguishes sharply between truths about God that are capable of rational proof and those which can be believed.

3. “Supernatural theology” includes both what reason knows about God and what revelation reveals about God, which are presented in a systematic way.

a. Philosophical and theological truth belong to different orders of truth.
b. Faith is an “assent to revealed truth” and not an existential mode of trust or commitment. We are capable of such assent by Divine grace.

c. Faith is intellectual assent to truth of a different order than that of philosophical knowledge. We are raised to a different mode of being by supernatural grace in order to grasp the truths of faith.

d. The intellect in matters of faith does not respond to evidence but is motivated by the will to believe on the basis of an authority (God guarantees the truth of scripture). This willed assent is empowered by the supernatural grace of God.

e. The grace of faith is not a power to know something we cannot know by ordinary reason; it enables me to will to believe revealed truths I cannot otherwise know. It is not a nonrational knowledge of God or a mystical experience. The grace of illumination itself does not reveal anything.