

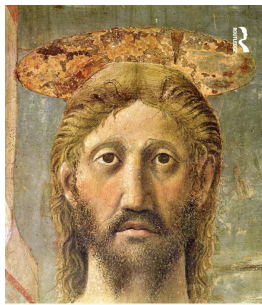
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MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION  
EDITED BY GRAHAM OPPY AND N. N. TRAKAKIS  
THE HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

## Medieval Philosophy of Religion

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### Roger Bacon

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## ROGER BACON

Jeremiah Hackett

Unlike his younger contemporaries, Aquinas and Bonaventure, Roger Bacon (c.1214–1292) did not write a treatise on the existence and nature of God, nor did he leave us a series of *Questiones* on topics related to the philosophy of religion. Moreover, he does not fit neatly into a modern ‘analytic’ understanding of philosophy of religion where the latter is often understood to be a justification of religion before the bar of argument alone. It is not that argument is lacking in Bacon’s account, but that argument occupies a place that is clearly subordinate in Bacon to experience and to revelation. Bacon presents a view of a universal revelation of all knowledge beginning with the Hebrews and continued by the Greeks, Romans, Islam and Christianity that was to be common teaching until the European Enlightenment. This entails a universal revelation of all knowledge, both sacred and secular.

My account will emphasize the views of the mature Bacon (1260–92), since it is in this period that Bacon most explicitly discusses the relationship of philosophy and religion.

## PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before presenting Bacon’s account of the relation of philosophy to theology in *Opus maius* (Major work), part 2, I shall present the historical context outlined in part 1 of the *Opus maius* for Bacon’s belief that philosophy as the search for wisdom must begin as a negative criticism of the impediments to knowledge. These are: submission to faulty and unworthy authority, influence of custom, popular prejudice and the concealment of one’s own ignorance by means of ostentatious rhetoric. In regard to knowledge, Bacon is no egalitarian. “For many have been called but few are chosen for the reception of divine truth and philosophical

truth as well” (*Opus maius* 10–11).<sup>1</sup> He holds that the way of the gifted few (the *Sapientes*) in philosophy and theology is superior to methods of the *vulgus philosophantium* (the common herd of philosophers).

From the beginning, Bacon introduces an unexpected element. He does not see the debate between philosophy (science) and religion as one between reason (argument) alone and religious faith. Rather, all epistemic activity involves the following: authority, reason, experience and belief. In Bacon’s view, the omission of any one of these four elements leads one to an artificial epistemic situation.

Bacon is convinced that worthy and tested authority is preferable to faulty authority. He thinks that bare reason alone without experience can lead to unfounded theory. And so, for Bacon, it is never the case that philosophy of religion involves just a bare argument alone without experience. In fact, for him at every level – from the physical to the psychic to the mental to religious experience – a bare argument, without the requisite experience, is blind.

Bacon’s own understanding of truth and revelation is conservative. Following the example of Aristotle, whom he regards as the leading philosopher, and of Seneca, Bacon holds that one must respect one’s predecessors. Bacon looks to Avicenna (Ibn Sina), “the chief authority in philosophy after Aristotle”, and to Averroes (Ibn Rushd) as his own predecessors. One must not underestimate the enormous influence these Islamic thinkers have on Bacon, specifically in terms of philosophy of religion. We shall see this specifically in Bacon’s *Moralis philosophia* or “*Moral Philosophy*” (*Opus maius*, pt 7). This dependence on his predecessors enables Bacon to sketch out a progressive history of the appropriation of wisdom. “Just as Averroes, the greatest after these [Aristotle, Avicenna] refuted Avicenna, so also our men of science correct him in more instances, and rightly so, since without doubt he erred in many places, although he spoke well in others” (*Opus maius* 15). This critical open-mindedness on Bacon’s part is not limited to his reading of the philosophers. He also argues that “not only the philosophers but even the sacred writers have been subject to some human infirmity in this respect” (*Opus maius* 15). As examples of theological disagreement and necessary criticism as a constituent part of a religion, Bacon cites the examples of Paul against Peter and Augustine against Jerome.

Moving to his own times, Bacon states that despite past condemnation of “the Philosophers” between 1210 and 1265, the wise thinkers (*Sapientes*) at Paris c.1266:

approve of the abovementioned [Islamic thinkers] *as both philosophers and sacred* writers, and we know that every addition and increase in wisdom they have made are worthy of favour, although in many other

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1. References to *Opus maius* (Bacon 1900) are to section numbers. Translations throughout are my own.

matters they have suffered a lessening of their authority and in many matters they are superfluous, and in certain need correction and in some explanation. (*Opus maius* 21)

From this it is clear that twelve years before the Parisian Condemnation of 1277, Bacon defends the integration of Greek, Roman and Islamic philosophy into Christian learning, and he condemns those theologians and canon lawyers who had condemned “the philosophers and the scientists”. Indeed, it has been shown that as a professor of philosophy in the 1240s, Bacon had anticipated the main issues in philosophy of religion that arose owing to the reception of Aristotle in the Latin West (Hackett 2005). Much of his ‘philosophy of religion’ is an attempt to secure the learning of these important thinkers for the *Res publica Christiana*. Bacon integrates this learning by introducing ‘science/philosophy’ as the *handmaiden of theology* (Lindberg 2003: 7–32). Naturally, this might seem strange to a modern reader, but in fact it was by means of this device that Bacon, like Albertus, Bonaventure, Aquinas and many others, managed to build a permanent place within the Christian religion for scientific practice and philosophical reflection. Significant in this respect is the fact that Bacon is worried that some theologians and canon lawyers have unfairly and blindly attacked both the great philosophers and theorists of natural science. His ‘philosophy of religion’ is largely an effort to recover these domains within the Christian world of the Middle Ages. One might see the *Opus maius*, then, as a synthesis of human experience, science, philosophy and religion. But unlike his younger contemporaries such as Bonaventure and Aquinas, Bacon did not write a treatise on this topic. Rather, he developed a long ‘*persuasio*’, that is, a rhetorical argument, for this new synthesis of philosophy, science and religion, based, according to Bacon, on the example of the two important English theologians and scientists Robert Grosseteste and Adam Marsh.

#### PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY AS MODES OF WISDOM

Bacon’s understanding of the relation of philosophy to theology depends on his understanding of truth. For him, the revelation given in the sacred Scriptures is the one and only source of truth. He states:

I wish, in this second distinction, to point out that there is but one perfect wisdom contained in Sacred Scripture from whose roots all truth branches out. I say, therefore, that one science is the mistress of the others, namely, theology, to which the remaining sciences are completely necessary and without which it is not capable of reaching its fulfilment. Theology claims the strength of these sciences for her own law, to whose nod and rule the other sciences subordinate themselves. Or better, there is perfect wisdom, which is totally contained in

Sacred Scripture, and which ought to be unfolded by means of Canon Law and Philosophy. (*Opus maius*, pt 2, 36)

For Bacon, moral philosophy is the branch of philosophy that is closest to theology. Indeed, for Bacon, the natural moral law is contained in and originates from Scripture, and thus its origin is essentially theological. Modern presentations of natural law as the self-sufficient produce of practical reason would be an absurdity for Bacon. It would be a foundationalism without an explicit theological origin. For him, even the common law is both divine and human. From a modern viewpoint, it would appear that philosophy as an independent, autonomous activity has been totally subordinated to theology.

Indeed, Bacon is writing explicitly as a Christian theologian who looks to Augustine as his model (*see* Vol. 1, Ch. 18, “Augustine”). The doctrine of divine illumination is given as the foundation for Bacon’s understanding of the discovery of truth. Whereas in his early works Bacon spoke of an agent intellect within the human being, he now (post-1265) holds that God alone is the agent intellect:

The agent intellect is the one which flows into our minds, illuminating them in regard to virtue and knowledge ... And thus the agent intellect, *according to the greater philosophers*, is not a part of the soul, but is an intellectual substance different and separated essentially from the possible intellect. And since it is necessary for the persuasion of my position to show that philosophy exists through the influence of divine illumination, I desire to prove this point conclusively, especially since a grave error has invaded the rank and file of philosophers in this particular matter, and has also invaded a large number of theologians. For what a person is in philosophy that he is proved to be also in theology. (*Opus maius*, pt 2, 45)

What does he mean by “the greater philosophers”? They constitute all great thinkers from Moses through the Greeks up to Bacon’s own times (Hackett 2000).

Bacon places Aristotle, the greatest philosopher, in the tradition coming from Plato as expounded by Plotinus and others. He takes over Aristotle’s language in stating that it is better to speak of the illuminating “agent intellect as a substance separate from the soul in essence” (*ibid.*). In Bacon’s view, the leading Islamic philosophers such as Avicenna and al-Farabi as well as leading Christian philosophers such as William of Auvergne and Grosseteste defended this synthesis of ancient wisdom as handed on by al-Farabi and Avicenna. Moreover, since “God has illumined the minds of those men in perceiving the truths of philosophy, it is evident that their labor is not opposed to the divine wisdom” (*Opus maius*, pt 2, 49).

One might ask: if philosophy is foundationally illumined by God, what is the task of philosophical reflection and knowledge? Put simply, the history of philosophy for Bacon has the task of leading the human being from knowledge of

creation towards knowledge of the creator. “For speculative philosophy attains knowledge of the Creator through knowledge of creatures, and moral philosophy establishes the honesty of morals, just laws and worship of God” (*Opus maius*, pt 2, 51). Indeed, the latter enables the human being to seek ultimate happiness in this life and in the next. *Philosophy, therefore, is an introduction or preamble to theology*. Philosophy and science disclose the material, formal and efficient causes of natural or created events. Illumined divine wisdom reveals the ultimate goal of natural and human events. For example, science and philosophy identify the material, formal and efficient causes of the rainbow; sacred Scripture in the book of Genesis identifies the final cause of the rainbow. As a consequence, philosophy occupies a necessary but lower position than theology in the search for ultimate wisdom. “And philosophy considered only in itself has no usefulness ... And so philosophy cannot have anything of dignity except in so far as it has something that is required by Divine Wisdom” (*Opus maius*, pt 2, 69). The highest goal of knowledge, therefore, consists in a “Reduction of the Arts to Theology” (*ibid.*).

Bacon presents his understanding of the historical unfolding of wisdom based on Jewish, Islamic and Christian sources in the context of this theory of the origin of truth. For him, there are two traditions of truth and wisdom, one constructive, the other destructive. The constructive tradition is that of the great philosophers and theologians from Plato to Grosseteste. It is important to note that medieval writers like Bacon think of philosophical authorities much as they thought of religious authorities. And so, just as Paul is given the authoritative title of ‘Apostle’, Aristotle is given the authoritative title of ‘Philosopher’ (*Philosophus*).

The destructive tradition is the anti-philosophical mythological tradition that Bacon associates with Nemroth, Zoroaster, Atlas, Prometheus, Mercurius Trismegistus, Aesculapius, Apollo and Minerva, “who were worshipped as Gods on account of their own wisdom” (*Opus maius*, pt 2, 67–8). Nimrod the Giant is both the one who destroyed the unity of language and the figure from the *Liber nimroth* who is to be worshipped because of his knowledge of the heavens.

For Bacon, then, his contemporaries stand on the shoulders of giants, that is, philosophical giants, but they are continually lured away from philosophy by the false self-important mythical claims of the followers of Nemroth. And in Bacon’s view, pagan philosophers such as Aristotle or Seneca, Jewish and Islamic philosophers as well as Christian philosophers are in agreement in opposing this self-centred mythical wisdom. And he states:

For this the unbelieving philosophers do, compelled by the truth in so far as it was granted to them; for they refer all philosophy to divine wisdom, as is clear from the books of Avicenna on *Metaphysics and Morals* and from al-Farabi, Seneca, Cicero and Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* and *Ethics*. For they refer all things to God as an army to its chief, and draw conclusions regarding angels and many other substances. (*Opus maius*, pt 2, 70)

Bacon's account of non-Christian philosophical discourse on God was not limited to the texts of the 'great' philosophers available to him. He had read William of Roebuck's account of a staged religious dialogue before the Great Kahn and had spoken with the author about his experiences (see Southern [1962] for an account of this event). Indeed, for Bacon, "the principal articles of (Christian) faith are found in these thinkers" (*Opus maius*, pt 2, 70). *God has illumined these great philosophers*. According to him, these philosophers are aware of the limitations of critical questioning in philosophy. Critical questioning was essential to human flourishing. Yet, these thinkers claim that philosophy as sceptical enquiry alone may not be self-sufficient. "And for this reason, philosophy advances to the discovery of a higher science, and proves that it must exist, although philosophy cannot unfold it in its special function. And for this reason, Philosophy transcends itself into the science of divine things" (*Opus maius*, pt 2, 75). One can see how Bacon can derive this understanding of philosophy from his predecessors: all of the ancient philosophers with the possible exception of the sceptics and Epicureans held to some such position, namely, that philosophy led the questioner through critical thinking to some form of union with the divine.

Philosophy, then, has the task of being a preamble to religious belief. The arguments within philosophy in this task are internal to philosophy; they do not belong to this higher theological knowledge. Still, Bacon expects more from his philosophical predecessors than bare philosophical argument alone. For him, the ancient and medieval philosophers "were anxious to inquire about the verification of a school of wisdom in which the salvation of humankind could be found, and these philosophers give clear methods of proof about this as will be shown in our *Moralis philosophiae*" (*Opus maius*, pt 2, 76). And so, for Bacon, philosophy is intimately linked with the discovery of the 'care of the self' in which a *way of salvation* can be discovered. Bacon's treatise on moral philosophy examines natural theology, virtue and religion in the context of the claims of Western religions, including Islam, in order to identify such a universal path to salvation.

In presenting this search, Bacon, reacting to the practice of Crusades, is quite optimistic in his belief that if great philosophers from the great world religions could engage in rational discourse as philosophers, they could achieve a measure of common agreement about human well-being. And in this manner, 'philosophy of religion' could become the basis for inter-cultural understanding. For Bacon, 'philosophy of religion' is a constituent part of moral philosophy, and in this sense even metaphysics becomes a part of moral philosophy.

Bacon expresses this view forcefully:

But with Christian students of Philosophy, moral science apart from the other sciences and made perfect *is* theology. And this moral science adds the faith of Christ and divine truths to the theology of the pagans. This moral science has its own speculative part prior to the moral-practical part. But the end, namely, the Christian Law, adds

to the Law of the Pagan Philosophers the formulated articles of the faith, by which means it completes the law of moral philosophy so that now one can have *one complete* law. For the Law of Christ takes and assumes the laws and morals of philosophy, as we are assured by the Sacred Writers and by the practice of theology and the Church.

(*Opus maius*, pt 2, 77)

It would appear, then, that Bacon has so taken up philosophy into religion as to render *philosophy as a foundational discipline* redundant. Still, he can claim that both philosophy and religious wisdom can address “the many common rational truths, which every wise person would easily accept from one another” (*Opus maius*, pt 2, 78). The means for addressing these common truths is nothing other than careful use of rational logic and grammar. In this way, Bacon has managed to build the tradition of rational argument and grammar into the heart of a religious determination of the meaning of life, but he would seem to do so at the cost of a radical self-limitation of the powers of philosophy.

Before proceeding directly to an explicit treatment of these concerns in his *Moralis philosophia* (*Opus maius*, pt 7), Bacon will take up the issue of the applications of philosophy and the liberal arts (the linguistic arts and the natural sciences) to religion and theology. It is in this application that Bacon will develop some of his significant and novel approaches to the relationship between ‘philosophy and science’ and religion.

#### THE APPLICATIONS OF PHILOSOPHY (ARTS AND SCIENCES) TO RELIGION

Writing as an emeritus professor, Bacon regards the *sentence-method* of theology as being linguistically defective (see *Opus minus* [Minor work] 322). Hence, a complete reform of language study is recommended as the starting-point of philosophy. This study is much wider than the bare introduction to languages that is normal for most students of philosophy in the medieval university.

First, students should be grounded in the Wisdom languages (Hebrew, Greek, Chaldean). The proper study of language at all levels is fundamental for Bacon’s philosophy of religion. These levels include vernacular, technical linguistics (technical Latin) and semiotics. In Bacon’s judgement, the philosophy and theology of his contemporaries fails because of its lack of a critical theory of language. Drawing on Augustine and Aristotle, Bacon presents a novel semiotic theory that has the effect of changing the traditional relation between sign, concept and thing in ways that would eventually lead in the fourteenth century to a nominalist semantics. For most of Bacon’s contemporaries, the relation of sign to thing signified was primary, and that of sign to perceiver of the sign was secondary. For him, however, a sign is not a sign unless it is perceived. “The sign is in the predicament



of relation and is spoken of essentially in reference to *the one for whom it signifies*” (*De signis* [On signs] 81). In Bacon’s view, words refer immediately and directly to present things and indirectly to concepts. Reference to past things and future things is made by way of analogy. For him, the traditional view allowed ambiguities to enter philosophical discourse, and also theological discourse. Thus, for Bacon, the complete speech act involving both speaker and hearer needs much logical and grammatical analysis. Bacon’s late work (c.1292) deals with the difficulties about *ambiguity* in philosophical and religious discourse.

In parts 4–6 of the *Opus maius*, Bacon examines the uses of mathematics in the sciences and addresses the importance of mathematics for religion. His doctrine of the multiplication of species presents a physics of nature in which the notion of a universal multiplication of forces is presented. This physics of light is connected to the metaphysics of light. Bacon presents the ways in which religion can benefit from the study of mathematics: calendar reform, geographical study, study of astrology. In *Opus maius*, part 5, Bacon presents the rudiments of a philosophy of mind and a treatise on *Perspectiva*. At the end of the treatise, he argues that the language of optics can be used as a suitable metaphor for moral and religious persuasion. Indeed, Bacon is the one, under the influence of Grosseteste, who introduced this perspectivist analysis of moral discourse into the Latin West as an aid to preaching and teaching in religion. It was taken up and developed in the *Tractatus moralis de oculo* (The moral treatise on the eye), the influential treatise by Peter of Limoges (c.1285) (see Newhauser 2001). These major parts of Bacon’s works dealing with *physical change* should not be overlooked. They are relevant for Bacon’s understanding of religion. The doctrine of the multiplication of species and the doctrine of *perspectiva* are an essential part of his physical doctrine of light, which in turn is related to moral philosophy (theology) and to the background Neoplatonist ‘metaphysics of light’ in Grosseteste and Marsh. They would provide Bacon, Peter of Limoges and others with new metaphors for explanation in religious and moral teaching.

#### BACON’S MORALIS PHILOSOPHIA: PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AS MORAL DISCOURSE

Bacon’s treatise on moral philosophy is divided into six parts. Part 1 deals with the task of philosophy with regard to proof and testimony in religion. Part 2 is a very brief summary of Avicenna on law and social life. Part 3, the largest part, is a summary of Aristotelian and Latin Stoic teaching on the primacy of virtue and the virtuous sage. Part 4 deals with the forms of religious life known in the Middle Ages; it is astrological and sociological in nature. Part 5 deals with the role of rhetoric and poetics in regard to persuasion in religion. Part 6 is a one-page summary on forensic rhetoric. Thus, the scope of moral philosophy includes: (i) metaphysics in relation to morals, (ii) social life, (iii) the care of the self,

(iv) religious groups, their goals and methods of proof, (v) persuasion and religion and (vi) forensic rhetoric.

*Metaphysics, the foundation of morals*

In Bacon's view, moral philosophy is essentially practical in nature. "This science is preeminently active, that is operative, and deals with our actions in this life and the other" (*Moralis philosophia* 3). The object of this science is human action. These actions are concerned with the practical intellect as it leads to actions that are good or evil. Practical matters of the artificial or natural kind are products of the speculative intellect. For Bacon, practical matters of the moral kind (*operabilia*) are more difficult to know than are the objects of the speculative intellect. In fact, the corruption of the human will and our natural irascible nature make it difficult for human beings to perform these moral actions. According to Bacon, the main *operabilia* consist of "the highest truths concerning God and divine worship, eternal life, the laws of justice, the glory of peace and the sublimity of the virtues" (*Moralis philosophia* 247). The 'eternal matters' are difficult for human beings owing to sin, the body and the immediacy of sensible things.

Moral philosophy has two parts. The first deals with the speculative aspect of moral questions such as the nature of God and the Good, that is, the ultimate goals of human life and whether we can know those goals. The second examines the processes of moral persuasion. Bacon's example is instructive: one may know much theory from books on medicine but such knowledge does not give one any adequate experimental/experiential knowledge of medical matters. In this, Bacon is presenting the argument that experience of actual phenomena is more important than mere argument or book knowledge (knowledge on the basis of scribal authority). In moral matters, according to Bacon, one has appeal to the following: *authority*, *experience* and *reason*. Bacon is opposed to any moral theory that would base itself on bare *reason alone*. And so for Bacon, "The practical half [of Moral Philosophy] is related to the first half as the curing of the sick and conservation of health that is treated in the practical part of medicine is to that part of medicine where one teaches about the nature of health" (*Moralis philosophia* 248). Just as there are professors of medicine who know medical theory but are terrible practitioners, so too there are professors of moral theory who know about the works of human action (*operabilia*) but who are themselves morally reprobate.

This moral and civil science of the human being in relation to God, to others, to itself and to the laws, has the task of persuading us to moral well-being. Moral philosophy, to the extent that it can, is essential to this task and is therefore the noblest science. It is the internal goal of all the sciences. Indeed, it deals with the same objects as theology; the latter simply considers these objects in the light of the Christian faith. In fact, moral science as the end or goal of the other sciences takes up the conclusions of these sciences as premises in moral science. And in a certain manner, the principles of moral philosophy are verified in the

other sciences so that they can be gathered from those sciences in so far as they are guided to a moral goal. Philosophers have spread moral matters throughout their speculative endeavours in order to move human beings to wisdom. These remarks should be collected and used in moral philosophy. Moral philosophy is therefore the queen of all the preceding sciences. This allows the moral philosopher to draw on the authors of these sciences such as Aristotle, Avicenna and Averroes.

As a result, Bacon concludes that “It ought to be known that there is a deep agreement between Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy” (*Moralis philosophia* 7). They both deal with topics such as God, angels and eternal life.

For Metaphysics properly investigates by means of the common concepts of all the sciences, and inquires about spiritual matters on the basis of knowledge of corporeal matters, and from the latter reaches a knowledge of the Creator, and from our present life it learns about the future life. In this, it offers many preambles (*preambula*) to Moral Philosophy. (*Moralis philosophia* 7)

What follows consists of the *testimonies* of the ancient philosophers concerning knowledge about God and the immortality of soul. Bacon will argue that ancient philosophers spoke not only about the bare fact of the existence of God but that they anticipated significant internal Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation.

Metaphysics according to Bacon can demonstrate that God exists and can be naturally known by human beings; that “God is infinite in power and goodness”; that God in essence is One and not a multiplicity, and that though he is One in essence he is threefold in another manner; that God created and governs all things in the “being of nature”; that in addition to corporeal beings he has created the “spiritual substances” that we call “intelligences or angels”, and that apart from these he created other spiritual substances, namely “the rational souls present in humans”; and that he created them immortal; that there is the happiness (*felicitas*) of the afterlife, namely, the highest good, and that the human being has a capacity for this happiness; that God governs the human race on the path of life just as he does other things in the “being of nature”; that God promises eternal life to those who live rightly in this life according to the rule of God, and that those who live an evil life deserve a wretched future as Avicenna teaches in the tenth book of his *Metaphysics*; that God ought to be worshipped with due reverence; that just as one is directed to God in due reverence, so too one must be directed to one’s neighbour in justice and peace, and to one’s self in a virtuous life; that the human being on the basis of his own knowledge cannot ultimately know the will of God but must depend on the truth of a revelation; and that there is but one revealer, a mediator between God and human beings, and the Vicar of God on earth to whom the whole human race is subject. This law-giver and highest

priest, who “in spiritual and temporal matters has fullness of power”, is, in the words of Avicenna’s *Metaphysics* book 10, “a human God, who is allowed to be worshipped after God. And thus *Metaphysics* continues into *Morals* and descends into *Morals* as towards its own end, as Avicenna so beautifully conjoins them at the end of his *Metaphysics*” (*Moralis philosophia* 9; see 211–23 for development of this theme). Having understood the limitations of metaphysics with regard to morals, the ‘Legislator’ ought to turn to those topics such as ‘the attributes of God in particular, angels and eternal life’, issues that metaphysics as a discipline is not able to examine in depth. Metaphysics can ask ‘Does God exist?’, but while it can discourse about ‘a being and being’, it is not able to enter into any depth about the nature of God. But moral philosophy can examine all the secrets of God and angels and other matters in so far as these need to be explained to the masses of human beings, lest they fall into heresy as Avicenna teaches in *The Foundations of Moral Philosophy*. Elsewhere, Bacon expands on this latter theme:

For the multitude is too imperfect, and for this reason a plea for the faith that is within its grasp is crude, undigested and unworthy of the learned. I wish therefore to proceed on higher ground and to present a persuasion concerning which the learned can judge. For in every nation there are some industrious people who are fitted for wisdom, who can be persuaded by the force of reason so that when these men become enlightened, the persuasion through them of the multitude becomes easier. (*Moralis philosophia* 196–7)

#### THE TESTIMONY OF THE ‘GREATER PHILOSOPHERS’ ABOUT THE SUBJECT MATTERS OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Bacon notes that he has already (in *Opus maius*, pt 2) shown how and why philosophers can discourse about God, that is, the “greater philosophers” had a “revelation” that they had received from the ancient “Patriarchs and Prophets” who wrote about matters not only “theologically and prophetically, but also philosophically, since they discovered and taught all of philosophy” (*Opus maius* 72). However, although the metaphysician can speak of the unity and trinity of God, he needs access to moral philosophy (theology) to proceed in any depth.

What follows is a list of philosophical anticipatory testimonies about the truths of Christian belief. Plato and Aristotle are taken to have taught about the unity and trinity of God. This material is taken from Augustine’s history of philosophy in *De civitate Dei* (On the city of God) and from other writers. Aristotle is interpreted here on the basis of Bacon’s reading of the *Politics*, and on the basis of Averroes and Avicenna. Bacon examines the infinite power and goodness of God and then turns to testimony about an ‘Incarnate God’. This consists of examining elements in previous writers, ancient and medieval, who spoke about an ‘Incarnate

God. These include Porphyry and Abu Ma'shar. He then turns to the topic of 'the Antichrist', and mentions the testimony of Pliny and Solinus. He then uses the *Secretum secretorum* (The secret of secrets), Abu Ma'shar, Avicenna, Ethicus and Trismegistus to argue for the doctrine of the creation of the world, and he uses Aristotle and Avicenna to argue for the creation of angels and human beings as ones having 'voluntary motion'. Using the *Liber de causis* (The book of causes) and Ethicus, he argues for the generation of individual human beings as members of one species, and that an angel constitutes a species. He finds further information on angels in Plato as handed on by Apuleius. He argues that there is much in these 'pagan' philosophers that is suitable for Catholic Christians. The sections that follow concern the immortality of soul, future happiness and religious worship.

Bacon's account of the immortality of soul turns out to be an argument for the resurrection of the body on the basis of the philosophers. For Bacon, following Aristotle, virtue is not due to a soul inhabiting a body. It is the product of the union of both soul and body, that is, the human being by means of the soul. Thus, happiness (*felicitas*) is the result of this union of both soul and body. The composite of soul and body is there for the benefit of the one individual human being, and so happiness accrues to both parts of the composite (*Moralis philosophia* 23–4).

Moral philosophy can examine "the happiness of the other life" in a more particular manner than metaphysics. Owing to sin, corporeal preoccupation, attachment to the world and the lack of a revelation, the human being is impeded in the knowledge of future happiness. In this, Bacon depends greatly on Avicenna. In this world, the human being is spread out into earthly delights and, as Avicenna points out, we neglect "insensible and spiritual" being. Following Avicenna, Bacon recommends a purification of the mind from sin, earthly desires and a separation of the mind from the sensible world. In this way, the self will reach and become attached to "the intelligible world". Further, one is enabled to know these things that are beyond human comprehension by means of "a verification by means of a revelation and prophecy". In regard to these, we believe the testimony of "the prophets and law-givers, who have received a law from God". Those who follow this path will agree with Aristotle, Theophrastus and Avicenna that the practice of contemplation, in so far as that is open to human beings, provides the way to future happiness (*Moralis philosophia* 27). These philosophers have had a revelation from God.

Bacon links up this spiritual interior illumination with Aristotle's account of wisdom as the fulfilment of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He argues that *wisdom* is not the same phenomenon as "bare argument", but is a kind of "intellectual power" that also perfects the affective self. This is the beginning of future happiness and coincides with the knowledge and love of God. This leads to the "beatitude of the whole human being both in body and in soul". Complete happiness consists in participation in the supreme good.

In all of this, it is clear that Bacon advocates what one might call a 'traditionalist' understanding of wisdom. The philosophical elite organize the teaching and cult practices for the multitude. They veil the true teaching and practice from the

normal superstitious rites. Further, the philosophers dissimulate in their teaching and acknowledge public religion only because of public law and common practice, not on account of the truth of the matter. In this, Bacon is following the advice of Seneca.

Part 2 of the *Moralis philosophia* consists of Avicenna's quasi-Platonic organization of society into three parts: "*dispositores, ministros et legis peritos*". This is a blueprint for a social organization of society.

Part 3 of this work is a set of 'selected texts' with comment from the Latin philosophers, especially Cicero and Seneca. This account acknowledges the unity of virtue and the primacy of virtue as exhibited by the Stoic sage. For Bacon, "Virtue is the life of the human being". Bacon presents a brief account of the Aristotelian virtues and then proceeds to extol the Stoic sage as the ideal of the human moral agent. He defends the notion of the unity of all the virtues. A major section of this part deals with the vice of anger (wrath) in relation to leadership in society. Drawing largely on Seneca's *De ira* (On wrath), Bacon argues for a moral contempt of the world in which self-restraint and guided moral action will overcome the destructiveness of wrath (Hackett 1995). What follows is an extended account of the virtues and vices.

Part 4 of the *Moralis philosophia* examines the different kinds of religion known to Bacon, and attempts a classification of religions on the basis of the history of religion and astrological design. He gives an account of the religion of the Saracens (Islam), Tartars (Buddhism), pagans, idolators, Jews and Christians (*Moralis philosophia* 189), and uses the Aristotelian doctrine of the end of political life to describe each group. Bacon has the typical medieval Latin view that members of Islam are given to things of this world and to lust, owing to having many wives. He sees the Tartars as being guided by a desire for domination, and the pagans as a group who carry over their earthly goods to the next as seen in the heroic funeral pyre. In a similar way, the idolators in the East are dedicated to things of this life. The Jews seek both goods in this life and the goal of eternal life. Christians tolerate temporal goods so as to practise spiritual discipline in this life, so that in body and soul they will reach eternal life. This classification is set in the context of an astrological world. Bacon, like his contemporaries, acknowledges astrological influence and believes that nations can be described in astrological terms. Yet, he does hold strongly to a doctrine of the freedom of the will.

Part 5 of the *Moralis philosophia* deals with the 'rhetoric and poetics' of persuasion in religion. Since our speculative intellect can be weak in regard to moral actions (the *operabilia*), one has need of forms of persuasion. "The highest truths about God, divine worship, eternal life, laws of justice, the glory of peace and sublimity of virtue" are concerned with matters that transcend "bare rationality" (*Moralis philosophia* 247). These matters involve deep motivation, desire, inclination, hope and will. In brief, they belong to affective life and practical reason. It follows, therefore, that the dialectical and demonstrative arguments outlined by Aristotle in his *Logic* are not sufficient for this purpose. "Hence, Aristotle in book

one of his *Ethics* resolves that moral science does not have to use demonstrations but instead requires rhetorical arguments” (*Moralis philosophia* 250). In this way, speculative truth does not automatically lead to virtue and the practice of moral goodness. For Bacon,

Therefore, it is necessary that we have strong inducements in moral matters since the practical intellect is more noble than the speculative. Further, the practical intellect is related to what is good in a more difficult and less delightful manner than the speculative intellect is related to truth ...  
(*Moralis philosophia* 251)

This is his most explicit statement on the primacy of the practical intellect. The latter is induced to action primarily by means of rhetorical arguments. Still, any old rhetoric will not suffice. Bacon makes a sharp contrast between the mere forensic rhetoric of Cicero and the deeper moral rhetoric of Aristotle. “We need the complete doctrine found in Aristotle and his commentators.” This is a kind of argument based on truth that avoids fraud and sophistry. It is directed to the production of belief, right action and right judgement. Teaching, of course, is necessary but is not a sufficient means to move human beings to moral and religious actions. Oratory aimed at moving to action is required.

Bacon presents a threefold division of rhetoric corresponding to the threefold division of practical philosophy. The first kind deals with persuasion in religion. This is concerned with what is provable and with the levels of assent in religious truth. There are six forms of proof: the testimony of the Church, sacred Scripture, the witness of the saints, the abundance of miracles, the power of reasons and the consensus of Catholic teachers. The second kind of rhetorical argument deals with forensic rhetoric as seen in part 6 of the *Moralis philosophia*. The third kind of rhetoric is concerned with things that move us towards moral actions. He calls the first two kinds of persuasion, “rhetoric as such”.

According to Bacon, the third kind is labelled “poetic argument” by Aristotle and other philosophers. That is, truth-bearing poets sway us towards honest virtue. The example he gives is Horace, who provides noble and beneficial direction, as opposed to Ovid, who prevents mere frivolity.

In Bacon’s view, the ordinary student and teacher at the medieval university does not know this “poetic argument”. Diligent scholars who know the works of Aristotle and his Arabic commentators can know this argument. They can draw on al-Farabi, Avicenna, al-Ghazali and Averroes (see Black 1990; Rosier-Catach 1998). Here, we can see the extent to which Bacon’s ideas on religion and philosophy are determined by his great interest in these major Islamic thinkers. Bacon, at the end of part 5, links up these thinkers with major Roman and Christian thinkers. He takes Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana* (On teaching Christianity) as his model for the use of language and interpretation in religion (see Maloney 1995). But the baseline in all of this is that rhetoric and poetics are not something secondary,

a kind of frill added on to the obvious speculative truth of theoretical reason. Rhetoric and poetics in religion provide the only kind of argument that can move people to the practice of virtue and to religious practice. It helps to understand this when one sees that Bacon like Augustine links rhetorical/poetic persuasion to the appreciation of music, perhaps the most forgotten of the medieval quadrivium. Above all, it becomes clear that Bacon represents a different kind of philosophy of religion than that commonly found in Western philosophy. In the latter, the whole religious phenomenon is often reduced to a function of logical argumentation alone. Bacon appreciates the role of logic but he does not forget that in regard to human moral action, logic without the requisite moral experience is blind.

It will be clear from this account that Bacon belongs to a Christian culture in the Middle Ages that was profoundly influenced by various aspects of Jewish and Islamic religious and moral practices. He draws strongly on the tradition of truth and secrecy initiated by al-Farabi and developed by thinkers such as Maimonides (Hackett 2002). Above all, he is strongly influenced in his philosophy by Avicenna, al-Ghazali and Averroes. To characterize Bacon's position as an "Augustinisme-Avicennian", as Etienne Gilson did, is not mistaken. But it is clear that the names al-Farabi, al-Ghazali and Averroes must be added. Bacon succeeded in linking up the concerns of these philosophers with the tradition of Augustine, especially with the doctrine of truth as illumination and the doctrine of the primacy of moral actions over bare arguments.

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On FAITH see also Chs 6, 12, 16, 18; Vol. 1, Ch. 13; Vol. 3, Chs 8; Vol. 4, Ch. 8, 10, 13; Vol. 5, Chs 7, 18. On IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL see also Ch. 16; Vol. 1, Chs 2, 4; Vol. 3, Chs 10, 19. On LANGUAGE see also Chs 4, 11; Vol. 3, Ch. 14; Vol. 4, Chs 3, 8; Vol. 5, Chs 13, 20. On MORALITY see also Vol. 3, Chs 2, 8, 12, 14, 21, 22; Vol. 4, Chs 4, 12, 18; Vol. 5, Ch. 6. On REASON see also Chs 10, 11, 16, 18; Vol. 3, Chs 8, 12, 16, 21; Vol. 4, Chs 4, 8. On SCIENCE see also Vol. 3, Ch. 17; Vol. 4, Chs 7, 11, 12, 15, 17, 19; Vol. 5, Chs 4, 19.