The very title of Pope John Paul II’s latest encyclical, *Faith and Reason*, raises the expectation in the reader that the Pope is going to deal with what has famously become known as “the problem of faith and reason”. Even a beginning student in theology will realise this. The problem can be put formally fairly easily.

Christian faith is said to be in accordance with reason and yet to go beyond reason. This claim immediately gives rise to a difficulty. On the one hand the concordance of faith with reason seems to reduce Christian belief to rational thinking and to natural human experience; on the other hand the difference between faith and reason seems to make belief unreasonable and arbitrary.¹

Three things need to be said about this formulation. Firstly, the problem is put as a Christian problem. It is a problem of revealed religion. In fact, it is also a problem for Islam, as the writings and life of Averroes make clear². It was not, however, a problem for the Greeks. While Plato and Aristotle had to be careful of people’s sensibilities as they investigated God and religion and in certain respects undermined the religious myths of their day, they did not have to deal with religious beliefs that laid claim to be in accordance with reason.

Secondly, “reason” and “rational thinking” take on more than primitive meaning. It is not just a matter of *homo sapiens* thinking but rather of human beings thinking in particular ways which result in what we call *episteme* or *scientia* or science and in relation to which philosophy has throughout history had a special place. Central to these ways of thinking are claims to the rightness of the judgements they make. Each involves, at least in part, an attempt to know things that are beyond the ken of ordinary folk and that are not drawn easily from what appears as obvious. It is for this reason that the discussion of faith and reason in the encyclical tends to become a discussion of theology and philosophy with reference to science. There was no issue for the Hebrews, for whom this kind of thinking had not been explicitly developed. Even in the Wisdom literature it is virtually assumed that reason will lead one to God. It is only the fool who says that there is no God.

Thirdly, although the problem can be stated formally with ease, if we try to unpack it conceptually, it will prove notoriously difficult.³ “The problem” relates to human activity. When people engage in such activities as science and philosophy, on the one hand, and religion, theology and magisterial teaching, on the other, difficulties arise in reconciling both the nature of the activities and some of their fruits. Human activities take place in time. They vary in terms of the projects to which they belong, in quality and in their relevance to the life issues of the people who pursue them. In philosophy and theology, full comprehension of the matters addressed is rare. What we call “the problem”, therefore, arises differently in different times and must be addressed in terms of what is being done during those times. This is why much of Chapter IV of the encyclical is given to tracing important moments in the encounter between faith and reason.⁴

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³ See, for instance, E. F. Byrne and E. A. Maziarz, *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Faith and Reason”, who, in their first section, attempt to deal with faith and reason as concepts and even as “entities”.
⁴ See also number 74 where John Paul II names theologians who were also distinguished as great philosophers and says, “One thing is certain: attention to the spiritual journey of these masters can only give greater momentum to both the search for truth and the effort to apply the results of that search to the service of humanity.”
John Paul II gives special treatment to the achievements of two theologians: Saint Anselm (14, 42, 74) and Saint Thomas Aquinas (13, 43-45, 57-61, 74, 78).

Saint Anselm (1033-1109) wrote during the renaissance of Western and Christian life that led to medieval scholasticism. He shared Augustine’s conviction of the truth of faith and had to hand the logic of the Greeks but not their natural philosophy. The Pope quotes from Anselm’s Proslogion early in the encyclical (14). In turning to a proof for the existence of God and in allowing the possibility of its denial, Anselm turned reason towards [22] faith itself. This was different from the Patristic practice of drawing in useful definitions and distinctions and marks the beginning of greater harmony between faith and reason and of the certainty that faith can not only survive but can also flourish under the scrutiny of reason. (42) Implicit in Anselm’s argument is also the beginning of a philosophical articulation of the Christian understanding of God.³

Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) wrote during the high-point of medieval scholasticism when most of Greek learning and particularly Aristotelian natural philosophy had come into the West. Much of his work consisted in absorbing this new learning and articulating a theology that both took account of the necessities of nature and was true to revelation. Thomas’s genius was in being able to give due proportion to things known by faith and to things known through evidence and reason. Some things such as the Incarnation can be known only by faith, and Thomas rejected the idea that reason could supply necessary reasons for them. Other things are known only by science. In a third group are things that can be known by either faith or science, but Thomas is adamant that the two do not coexist in respect of the same object in one person. Once we know something through science, it is no longer possible to hold it in faith.⁵

Thomas was able not only to give due weight to philosophy and theology but also to excel in both and to master the learning available in his time so as to generate a philosophy and a theology that were profoundly united and that took account of all that was known. It is for this reason that he could claim authentically that there could be no opposition between the truth of reason and the truth of faith.⁷

John Paul II is writing in the 1990s. The intellectual landscape is not as it was in the thirteenth century. Modern science has discovered and demonstrated much that was not known then, and philosophy and politics have entertained new possibilities for human behaviour and association. However, in making these wonderful new discoveries, a civilisation that once knew God, has also dared to imagine a world without God. (45-46) Theology, on the other hand, lost its nerve during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and withdrew into its own little world to the extent that Ockham could claim that nothing can be proved about God and that all human reasoning about the divine is merely probable. Into this century, it can be argued, there has been little accommodation between philosophy, science and theology with serious consequences. (77)

John Paul II clearly puts himself in the tradition of Anselm and Aquinas. He believes that Christian faith will be able to deal with challenges it receives from natural reason. He also expects that both theology and philosophy work rigorously within their own methodologies and that their autonomy be respected (48, 49, 75). Further, he is confident that when they reach true conclusions about significant issues they will be in agreement.

In teaching in this way, John Paul II goes well beyond Leo XIII’s Aeterni Patris (1879), which called for a restoration for philosophy mainly by encouraging the adoption of the thought of St Thomas. (59) He says repeatedly that the Church has no official philosophy. (49, 76, 78) He also reverses the spirit of Pius X’s Pascendi Dominici Gregis (1907) and Pius XII’s Humani Generis (1950) by expressing the need to engage with the thought of the day rather than fleeing from it.

Ultimately, what John Paul II is asking will be done by one person - a theologian who is expert in philosophy and alert to the findings of science. Such a person will not, however, be alone but will be schooled by many. This is why much of the encyclical is directed to philosophers. Before the achievement of theological integration can be made, much has to happen philosophically. Where philosophy has become distracted from the major questions of human life, it has to re-establish [23] its focus. (1, 26) Where philosophy has taken on assumptions about the nature of things that are inimical to religious truth, it has to purify itself. (46, 86-91)

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⁵ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae II-II 1, 5. See also Etienne Gilson, Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages New York: Scribner: 1938), pp. 69-85.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, Summa contra Gentiles I, 7.
John Paul II cannot do this himself. He is speaking magisterially as the Bishop of Rome, and, in that role, there three things he can do. Firstly, he can refute philosophical positions that clearly contradict revealed truth. (45-46, 86-91) This is a limited and merely negative function. Secondly, he can propose parameters for a solution. This is what he does in Chapter VII, where sets out requirements for a philosophy that could work closely with Theology. (81-85). Thirdly, he can exhort philosophers, scientists and theologians to the seek the truth about things in ways that are not limited to one experiment or thought but which take into account all of reality, its unity and its relationship to God. (48, 85) This last is what the encyclical is primarily about.

Andrew Murray is a member of the Australian Province of the Marist Fathers. He completed his PhD in philosophy at the Catholic University of America and teaches now at the Catholic Institute of Sydney.