

Descartes, Luther, and the Fifth Lateran Council

Aderemi Artis

In the dedicatory epistle to his *Meditations*, Descartes presents his work as a fulfillment of *Apostolici regiminis*, the bull produced by the eighth session of the Fifth Lateran Council: 'the Lateran Council under Leo X, in the eighth session, has expressly commanded Christian philosophers to demonstrate the truth with their utmost strength.'¹ An examination of the text of *Apostolici regiminis* seems to corroborate Descartes' claim. We there find the council proclaiming, 'We command each and every philosopher teaching in universities of general studies or teaching publicly...to use all their efforts to make clear to their students the truth of the Christian religion.'² It therefore would have been a bitter irony had Descartes lived to see his *Meditations* and other works placed on the *Index of Prohibited Books* in 1663, thirteen years after his death.

The relationship between Descartes' work and the Christian religion have been the subject of both scholarly and lay attention from the beginning of his philosophical career. The topic of this essay will be confined to the specific issue of the relationship between the *Meditations* and *Apostolici regiminis*, although we will have occasion to discuss selected other elements from Descartes' oeuvre. My primary aim will be to show that when we attend to the specifics of the bull, and to the content and character of Descartes' claims in the *Meditations* and elsewhere, we find that Descartes does an exemplary job of carrying out the central doctrinal decree of the bull.

I will begin with an examination of the assumptions made about *Apostolici regiminis* by much Descartes scholarship, and will argue that the chief doctrinal decree of the bull is to deny the doctrine of double truth and assert there to be a single truth. I then contend that Martin Luther played a significant role in confounding the issue of the immortality of the soul with that of the doctrine of the double truth. Therefore, by the time Descartes began his work, specific doctrinal controversies prompted by the Reformation had sensitized his readers to topics such as the immortality of the soul and transubstantiation, to the

¹'Concilium Lateranense sub Leone X habitum, sessione VIII, & expresse mandat Christianis Philosophis...veritatem pro viribus probent' VII, 3. All translations are my own; I have benefited throughout from consultation with various extant English translations, as can be found in the bibliography. All quotations from Descartes are from the Adam and Tannery edition, all quotations from Luther are from the Weimar edition.

²'Insuper omnibus et singulis philosophis in universitatibus studiorum generalium, et alibi publice legentibus...mandamus...eisdem veritatem religionis christianae omni conatu manifestam facere' 606 in Tanner (1990).

neglect of the overriding theme of the doctrine of the double truth. Finally, I show how, throughout his career, Descartes staunchly held to the notion that there is only one truth, that truth cannot contradict truth, and that philosophy and reason, rightly employed, can never produce claims contrary to the established doctrines of the Holy Catholic Church.

The Significance of *Apostolici Regiminis*

Descartes' presentation of his *Meditations* as a fulfillment of the bull of the Fifth Lateran Council has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Most scholarship that takes up the relationship between the *Meditations* and *Apostolici regiminis* proceeds according to two key assumptions: first, that the purpose of *Apostolici regiminis* is to decree the human soul to be immortal, and, second, that the key relationship between the *Meditations* and the bull centers on the same topic. In addition to these two key assumptions, some scholars conclude that Descartes' attempts, while perhaps sincere and valiant, were, in the end, a failure.

An exemplary instance of this approach can be found in Stephen Gaukroger's *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*, where he claims that the purpose of 'the decree of the Lateran Council of 1513'¹ was to attack 'Alexandrian and Averroist heresies,'² and that Descartes in the *Meditations* hoped to 'defend the Church orthodoxy on God and the soul.'³ Gaukroger gives a succinct summary of the heresies he sees as the target of *Apostolici Regiminis*: 'in its Averroistic version...the intellect is in no way personal because mind or soul, lacking any principle of individuation in its own right, cannot be apportioned one to each living human body...in its Alexandrian version...the soul is conceived in purely functional terms; in either case, personal immortality is denied, and its source in both versions is Aristotle himself.'⁴ Finally, with regard to Descartes' relationship with these heresies, Gaukroger concludes, 'Alexandrianism and Averroism are the Charybdis and Scylla through which Descartes must steer a passage in setting out his doctrine of the nature of the mind. In this, he faces insuperable difficulties.'⁵

I contend, in contrast to the kind of position taken by Gaukroger and others, that the primary doctrinal goal of *Apostolici regiminis* is not to decree any specific doctrine regarding the human soul, its immortality, and the metaphysical underpinnings of this immortality, but rather to decree the doctrine of 'single truth' against that of 'double truth.'⁶ The most extreme version of the doctrine of double truth is, essentially, dialetheism – that a

¹337.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴149.

⁵348. See also C. Fowler, in *Descartes on the Human Soul: Philosophy and the Demands of Christian Doctrine*, who writes that 'at the Fifth Lateran Council...[the human soul was] defined as immortal, in opposition to the sixteenth century followers of the Averroist and Alexandrian interpretations of Aristotle' 312.

⁶My account of the council's aims closely follows that of Constant (2002).

