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Reflections on Christian Philosophy

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It is not without significance for the theme of our meeting that, in a chapter entitled "Christian Philosophy" in his remarkable memoir, *The Philosopher and Theology*, Etienne Gilson discussed the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, drawing attention to what became the traditional way of referring to it, viz. "On the Restoration in Catholic Schools of Christian Philosophy According to the Mind of the Angelic Doctor Saint Thomas Aquinas." Any discussion of the development of Gilson's thought and his altering interpretation of the writings of Saint Thomas, which can be traced through the various editions of *Le Thomisme*, must, I think, take into account the effect on him of the quarrel about the very concept of Christian Philosophy which began in 1931 and continued for some years, largely in France, and came to include many of the great figures of contemporary French philosophy, Gilson himself, Emile Bréhier who in effect began the quarrel, Jacques Maritain, Leon Brunschvicg, Van Steenberghe, Noël, Blondel and Renard, to name only the chief figures. That quarrel is discussed by Maurice Nédoncelle in his *Is There A Christian Philosophy?*¹ and André Henry in "La querelle de la philosophie chrétienne: histoire et bilan d'un débat."²

I do not propose to trace the outlines of that famous discussion here, nor to discuss the various works in which

Gilson returned to the question and sharpened his own position, works like *Christianisme et Philosophie* in 1949 and *Introduction à la philosophie chrétienne* in 1960, to say nothing of the master work *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*,³ the Gifford Lectures delivered in 1931-1932 when the controversy had hardly begun. The problem of Christian Philosophy pervades the work of Gilson after 1931 and nothing less than a detailed and circumstantial discussion of his *oeuvre* could possibly do justice to his views. My intention here is far more modest.

I shall content myself with a number of *obiter dicta* on a distinction made by Jacques Maritain in his little book *De la philosophie chrétienne*,⁴ published in 1933, and then go on to say a few things about the present status of Christian Philosophy in the United States.

Matters having to do with the adjective in the phrase "Christian philosophy" were, Maritain felt, better discussed with reference to the *state* of philosophy rather than its *nature*. Thus, to ask about the present status of Christian Philosophy is seemingly to embark upon an infinite regress—the state of the state, etc. Of course there is no real ambiguity here. Only a philosopher would have trouble with the wording of my task. Having proved that, if only glancingly, I pass on to the topic itself.

In the early Thirties, when Gilson and Maritain responded to the querulous claim of Bréhier that the concept of Christian Philosophy was incoherent, they quickly and rightly turned from Bréhier's pseudo-problem to issues that were their own and more important. The swiftest response to the charge was, *circumspice*, look around you. The Middle Ages provide us with numerous instances of Christian Philosophy. *Ab esse ad posse valet illatio. Ergo*, etc. Neither Maritain nor Gilson let it go at that, needless to say. Clearly the charge stirred up in them a desire to reflect on what they were doing as philosophers who were

Catholics. I want to recall very briefly what I take to be the abiding significance of what they had to say—it is because it is abiding that it fits under the title of our symposium—and then go on to characterize the philosophizing of Catholics in the United States today, with an added reference to the Society of Christian Philosophers formed just a few years ago.

The discussion of Christian Philosophy in the work of Maritain mentioned above moves on two levels, what I will call the modal and substantive levels.

Indiquons tout de suite quel est pour nous le principe de la solution; c'est la distinction classique entre l'ordre de spécification et l'ordre d'exercice, ou encore, et c'est à ces termes que nous nous tiendrons, entre la nature et l'état.⁵

The modal level is captured by the distinction between nature and state, nature and condition, the order of specification and the order of exercise. It is not necessary to think of philosophy as some inert nature having properties of its own which is then carried around by various sweating Atlases whose itinerary is the basis for a number of *per accidens* remarks about their burden. Better to think of the activity of philosophizing—*philosophieren*, as Pieper puts it⁶—and to distinguish what characterizes it formally as such from what characterizes it as undertaken by so-and-so in such-and-such circumstances.

It is easy for us to see the kind of distinction involved in the case of the moral appraisal of a given act of thinking or philosophizing. The act of thinking is good if it achieves its end which is truth. But the act, thus appraised, may be appraised differently, and negatively, because of the circumstances in which it takes place. If I am lolling on my yacht devising sound and convincing proofs for the existence of God while ignoring the cries for help of drowning swimmers, it is clear that my thinking may receive a plus

or a minus depending on our point of view. A judgment of the content of thought as opposed to a judgment of the engagement in thinking by this concrete person here and now, that is the distinction. Of course it would be odd and otiose to respond to the statement "Whatever is moved is moved by another" by asking "When? In the morning or evening? In the Northern hemisphere as well as the Southern?" By the same token, the schoolyard response, "Who says so?" would be inappropriate. We might, of course, want to make a similar distinction between sentences like "Roses are red" and "I have a toothache," saying that the latter but not the former involves the reporter in the report and thus is differently appraised with regard to its truth. But the distinction I am after is one that would distinguish the intrinsic judgment of an act of thinking (true or false?) from the moral judgment of it (good or bad?).

For an act of thinking to be true is for it to be good in one sense, but not in the moral sense. Just as it is not necessarily appropriate to utter any truth in just any circumstances (to do so could be a sign of madness, gaucherie or breach of promise, among other things), so the appraisal of an act of thinking as true is not the end of the matter. Even remarks about roses are said by someone in particular circumstances and while we may agree that roses are red and violets are blue, that does not settle whether the person uttering these simple truths is also engaged in wooing, translating from the Portuguese, encoding security information for the enemy, talking in his sleep or composing a valentine that Hallmark will not buy.

It is best to make the distinction where there is conflict, but of course it can happen that the act of thinking is approved on both levels. The classical conception of philosophy presupposed that even theoretical thinking would be, as well as the attainment of truth, a morally good activ-

ity. Indeed, one adumbration of the problem of Christian Philosophy in antiquity is the question as to whether a bad man could be a good philosopher, that is, the role of ethics in the philosophical life and the description of the philosophical ideal. It went without saying that the good ruler had to be a good man. How far we have come from that classical conception, even in the practical realm.

My suggestion, then, is that we can approach one facet of Maritain's handling of the question of Christian Philosophy by seeing the difference between a moral and an intrinsic appraisal of an act of theoretical thinking. Once we remind ourselves that the truth can be sought out of motives of vanity or the will to power or to *épater la bourgeoisie*, we can see how one might want so to describe the philosophical ideal as to insist that the right deed be done for the right reason and to suggest that without the appropriate moral orientation the whole thing is worthless. Plato held that it is moral virtue which gives us that necessary affinity with the really real which enables knowledge to take place. The elaboration of this *pathein/mathein* view lifts the moral from mere modal status to a substantive feature of philosophizing.

One of the curiosities of the debate on Christian Philosophy that should not go unremarked, was the tendency of those who cast themselves in the role of defending *pure* philosophy to speak of Christians as if they alone came to the philosophical task with convictions and certainties. The notion of *pure* philosophy is a rich subject for comedy and no one had more fun with it than Kierkegaard. Pure Thought is thought without a thinker, and philosophers began to think of themselves as identified with this abstraction.⁷ Unamuno, somewhat lugubriously, makes a similar point in *The Tragic Sense of Life* when he speaks of the man of flesh and bones. But of course theoretical thinking is merely one of the activities a man may engage

in; not only can he not devote himself exclusively to it, in the life of even the most dedicated scholar it amounts to a small portion of his day. Getting from A to B, opening and shutting doors, lighting one's pipe, deciding to read this book or that, to write or think some more, on and on. There is a whole quotidian network that sustains and surrounds intellectual activity and without which it cannot be understood. That network includes implicit and explicit certainties about the world and ourselves and this has the quite unsurprising implication, save for some philosophers, that we *bring* truths to our philosophizing; not all knowledge is the *result* of philosophizing.

Needless to say, taking the quotidian network into account casts into an appropriately hilarious light the notion that philosophy should begin with doubt.

When philosophers have managed to expunge such home truths from their minds, they have fashioned wrong and dangerous conceptions of man. Thus, if one equates being a man, being human, with engaging in theoretical thinking of the most abstract kind, say, geometry, it would seem to follow from the fact that not even geometers do geometry most of the time that few men ever engage in the supposed specifically human activity. But what is to be said of all those activities humans engage in if they cannot be called human? Out of this exiguous picture of man came, inevitably, the bloodless moral philosophy we are only now beginning to free ourselves from.⁸

It is only when everyone engaged in the discussion stops talking about *pure* philosophy, in the sense of thought without a thinker, that it is possible to ask what is *peculiar* about what the Christian brings to the activity of philosophizing and how it differs from what others, e.g. secular humanists, bring to that task.⁹ One of the peculiarities of the Roman Catholic philosopher, as witness this symposium, is that he takes with the utmost seriousness

documents emanating from Rome and having to do with his activity, documents like the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*.

Docility to the Ordinary Magisterium has fallen on bad days, of course, with theologians seemingly eager to quibble with, distance themselves from or outrightly oppose Christ's vicar on earth. I prefer to direct my incredulity at such theologians and to rejoice in the fact that the Church has consistently and over many centuries put before the Catholic intellectual, particularly the philosopher and theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas as a model. *Vae mihi si non thomistizavero*, Maritain wrote, and we might render it: For me not to follow Saint Thomas would be my ruin. That is the attitude we hope to see embodied in the Center whose inauguration we are celebrating. Anyone who thinks of that ideal as narrow or constraining need only consider the works of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. It was not merely one pope or one council or one committee that recommended Saint Thomas to us as a guide; it is the consistent and reiterated message of the Ordinary Magisterium. The only appropriate attitude toward this undeniable fact on the part of the Catholic is to see it as meant to help him attain the objectives of philosophy and theology. *Gustate et videte*.

This has to do with the starting point of our philosophizing. With what author should we begin? Any neophyte begins somewhere. Why does he begin where he does? The particular answers to that would be as numerous as the beginners but it seems fair enough to bring them all under one umbrella: one begins the study of philosophy where he does because he trusts someone. That is the common condition of the student. Viewed in this light, the situation of the Catholic is like anyone else's. But, of course, when he considers the authority and trustworthiness of *his* advisor, he can only conclude that he is in a far better position.

It is time that the Catholic intellectual resist the view that his existential situation is anomalous and in need of apology and adopt the more seemly stance of being grateful for the guidance he receives from the Church. The gift of faith is the best thing that ever happened to the human mind and the counsel and advice of those in whose keeping the deposit of faith is entrusted should be welcomed and received with joy, a joy which will eventually become a *gaudium de veritate*. It is silly to think that the upshot of all Catholics taking this advice will be uniformity and homogeneity of thinking. There is a single moral ideal for human persons which, if we pursue it seriously, will lead to a far greater differentiation among us rather than to somber sameness.

In the past several decades, interest in the thought of Saint Thomas has waned among Catholics even as it has waxed among our separated brethren. Doubtless there are dozens of reasons for this, few of them praiseworthy. Let us hope that the Center for Thomistic Studies here at the University of Saint Thomas will be a harbinger of a new renaissance of Thomism. Let us take up our all but discarded patrimony again and try to establish a mood like that which animated Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Charles De Koninck and Yves Simon, to speak only of those who came to us from abroad. Oh for the exuberance of a Chesterton, quoted to such effect by Pope John XXIII when he opened the Second Vatican Council! Those of us who have however fitfully and inadequately allowed our philosophizing to be guided by Saint Thomas Aquinas no longer merely believe that he is a good guide. It is something we have come to know. And that of course is the justification of the guidance. *Oportet addiscentem credere*. The complement of that truth is that, in philosophy, authority is the weakest argument.

So too Maritain, having provided a modal religious con-

text within which philosophical thinking takes place, goes on to suggest that the objects of religious faith, believed truths, exercise an intrinsic influence on philosophical content, on philosophical truth. He does not want to say that the origin of a philosophical truth in a revealed truth—he takes creation as an example—means that the acceptance of this truth is always and everywhere dependent upon religious belief.

A few years ago we formed the Society of Christian Philosophers, a group that holds regional meetings—these have been held at the University of Notre Dame as well as at Wheaton College in Illinois—and national meetings in conjunction with the eastern meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

It is a welcome thing to have philosophers identify themselves as Christians and, by doing so, to suggest that this has significance for them as philosophers. By and large, the non-Catholic membership in the Society consists of Evangelicals and Calvinists and Lutherans. Not surprisingly, when one considers the dominant themes of recent Philosophy of Religion, a central theme of the society is that religious belief is a rational, a reasonable activity to engage in. What I want to draw attention to, by way of contrast to what such a claim would mean in the context of *Aeterni Patris*, is the minimalistic, not to say fideistic, flavor of the thought of many of my colleagues in the Society.

If one maintains that belief is reasonable in the sense that no one can successfully convict the believer of inconsistency, contradiction, or some other mode of irrationality, this is not nothing. Oftentimes this position takes the form of a So's your old man argument. A classical instance of this can be found in Alvin Plantinga's *God and Other Minds*. The upshot of the book is that it is no less reasonable to assert the existence of God than it is to assert the existence of other minds. This does not come down to any

direct assertion that it is reasonable to affirm the existence of God. The technique of the book has led to the neologism "to alvinize." One alvinizes when, confronted by an attack on religious belief, one responds by seeking and finding a tenet of the attacker that can be shown to be at least as suspect, on the attacker's grounds, as the claims of religious belief. The *tu quoque* or *ad hominem* flavor of this is at once its appeal and its limitation.

In the same book, Plantinga examines versions of traditional proofs for the existence of God and finds them wanting. The suggestion thus is that while nothing positive can be rationally established with respect to theism, insofar as theism has problems they are shared by many convictions that the antitheist (Plantinga's atheologist) would be most reluctant to relinquish.

If Plantinga is typical of the Society—a pleasant thought since he is one of the most gifted philosophers and one of the most edifying Calvinists I know—it would be fair to say that fideism is rampant in the Society of Christian Philosophers. The status of Christian Philosophy should be discussed, I think, with particular reference to the status of natural theology. Traditionally understood, the reasonableness of belief is a claim that has reposed on an interpretation of Romans 1:19-20 which has it that men are capable, independently of faith, of arriving at knowledge of the invisible things of God. This is a task which cannot be ignored. Techniques such as alvinizing are useful and good and we should be grateful for them. But to settle for them would be to abandon one of the essential features of Christian Philosophy, viz. that there are sound and valid proofs of God's existence and of other *praeambula fidei* and that this provides a basis for the argument that it is reasonable to accept the *mysteria fidei* as true.

At the risk of unction of the extremer sort, let me conclude by drawing attention to a little book that Maritain

authored with his wife Raïssa, *Prayer and Intelligence*.¹⁰ As in Maritain's greatest work, *Les degrés du savoir*, the smaller work, originally titled *La vie d'Oraison*, reminds us that just as the ethical provides a wider context in which the activity of theoretical thinking can be appraised, so too does religion. God did not become man in order that men might become theologians. Contemplation, the fulfillment of the spiritual life, is the common supernatural goal of human persons. It is no less the goal of the Christian philosopher. Just as there has been an unhappy dissociation of thought and life, so there can be in the believer a dissociation of thought and the spiritual life. Saint Thomas, we remember, began study with a prayer and his study thus became a species of prayer. It is not without significance that the patron of Catholic intellectual life is a saint. Bloy's adage still obtains. There is only one tragedy, not to become a saint. How many saintly philosophers do you know? That is a judgment on us. The deepest significance of the notion of Christian Philosophy is that it would have us avoid a tragic life in this sense.

1. Maurice Nédoncelle, *Is There A Christian Philosophy?* Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1960), pp. 85-99.
2. In *Philosophies Chrétiennes, Recherches et Débats* (Paris: Librairie Fayard, 1955), pp. 35-68.
3. Translated by A.H.C. Downes (New York: Scribner's, 1940). *Christianisme et Philosophie* (Paris: Vrin, 1949); *Introduction à la philosophie chrétienne* (Paris; Vrin, 1960). *The Philosopher and Theology* (New York: Random House, 1962).
4. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1933).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
6. Josef Pieper, *Was heisst philosophieren?* (Munich: Hegner, 1948).
7. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.
8. See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*.
9. See my *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).
10. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1938).