

THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN REALISM

A lecture delivered by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.,
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The topic I have chosen, "The Origins of Christian Realism", is derived directly from a set of notes I put together last year on the positive part of the treatise De Deo Trino. If you want further details you can consult the first 165 pages of that manual. (B. Lonergan, S.I., De Deo Trino Pars Analytica, Romae, apud aedes Univ. Gregoriana, 1961.)

The question can be approached in four different ways. The title will probably suggest to many of you, if not all, the disputed question that was raised about thirty years ago in France and Belgium first of all when, in 1928, Emile Bréhier held a lecture in Brussels on the question of the existence of a Christian philosophy. His opinion was that there is no more a Christian philosophy than there is a Christian mathematics or a Christian physics; that philosophy is philosophy, and there is nothing specifically Christian about it. In 1931 Etienne Gilson, in a paper read before the Société française de Philosophie, took issue with M. Bréhier. He didn't want any confusion whatever of philosophy and theology, any mixture of their procedures, and de jure he doesn't believe too much in the capacity of unaided reason to arrive at truth. But he put forward the historical point that de facto the Greek philosophers did not anticipate and did not work out the specifically Christian conception of God as Creator, and the conception of divine providence. The philosophy that arrived at God as Creator and God as Providence was something that de facto, historically, is Christian. It arose in a Christian milieu. So at least historically there is such a thing as a Christian philosophy. And most recently he has returned to the issue in his book Un philosophe et la théologie. (I haven't read all of it myself, but I was told by a Frenchman that it is an extremely well written work, just the sort of work that justifies Gilson's membership in the Académie Française.)

In 1933 Maurice Blondel took issue with both Bréhier and Gilson. He denied that there was any parallel whatever between philosophy and mathematics, and that consequently there was no point in saying that there is no more a Catholic philosophy than there is a Catholic mathematics. He considered Gilson's introduction of the historical element as irrelevant; and he came to his point, namely, that philosophy is not a closed, abstract system: philosophy is worked out in the concrete, and in a Christian milieu develops differently than it does in a non-Christian milieu.

Now there are three opinions there, and I think a great deal can be said for them. I think that any ultimate view of the matter is going to take something from all three. This question of Christian philosophy is not the same as my question of Christian realism, but it does provide something of an antecedent for it.

The issue can be put in more abstract terms, in more specifically philosophic terms, namely, "What precisely do you mean by a 'realism'?"

* This printing was taken from the tape-recording of the lecture. Father Lonergan spoke from notes. In making this printed version, we have endeavoured to adhere as closely as possible to the spoken word.

And, as I have discovered, there are people who seem to think that if you hold that intellect is intelligent, then you're bound to be an idealist. And that conclusion follows if one holds certain ideas about realism. Realism is not just one type of philosophy: there is a series of different meanings of realism. And that is the point I propose to illustrate tonight by discussing an issue that is historical, namely, the origins of the Christian type of realism, that will pin down just what type of realism is specifically Christian. In its historical form — a third approach to the issue — one will ask, "How is it that Christianity became involved in philosophic issues?; that it gravitated toward a realist position, and that it gravitated toward the specific type of realism that is characteristic of Christianity?"

There is a fourth approach to the question — and this might be called the popular approach, one that is in everyone's mind, more or less, at the present time. It is of course an old question. Blaise Pascal in his Pensées contrasted the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our Fathers, on the one hand, and on the other, the God of the philosophers. The God of the philosophers is an actus purus, an ens necessarium, or, if you wish, 'an unrestricted act of understanding'. It is a God that is concluded and demonstrated and proved, worked out as the conclusion to a series of theorems. On the other hand, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our Fathers, is the God of revelation as recital. The God of Abraham is the One who did this and this and that, who said this and this and that, who promised this and this and that, who threatened this and this and that. He is conceived in what we would call the category of a person — the One 'who', a personal pronoun — , is characterized as a man is characterized, by his deeds, by his words, by his promises, by his threats. He is a personal force acting in and forming the Hebraic tradition. So conceived, there is no attempt made to say that the symbol is merely the symbol. The one element that bears witness to that philosophic concern is the prohibition of images. Similarly, in the revelation of our Lord in the Gospels, He is set forth in exactly the same type of category. He is the one who was promised; He is the only-begotten Son of God. He is the one who did and said this and this and that, as narrated in the Gospels; who suffered and died and rose again; who sitteth at the right hand of the Father; who will come to judge the living and the dead. You have two entirely different modes of conceiving God: the one of recital of deeds about a person, in the OT about God, in the NT about our Lord; and the other, the God of the philosophers.

But between those two conceptions of God there is a third, the God of the theologians. And it is with that conception of God that we are concerned tonight.

The theologians (or the Fathers, rather) from the second to the fourth centuries were concerned with trinitarian questions; from the fifth to the seventh, with Christological questions. And in that time they moved from the NT conception of God to the conception of one divine substance in three persons; and again, from the NT conception of our Lord to the conception of one person with two natures, two properties, two wills, and two operations. That historical process has been a subject of historical and theological discussion for a number of centuries, in fact since Petavius. And in Scholastik, 1958, Fr. Grillmeier has two long articles, on the interpretation of the history of that discussion, and on contemporary efforts along that line. It is within this

process from the God of the New Testament to the God of the theologians, of the Fathers and theologians and Councils, that I think are to be located the origins of Christian realism. In that period it was gradually discovered — and not too explicitly; rather by results than by any reflexive and methodical formulations — that a technical development was needed to state the truths of revelation, on the one hand without departing from Scripture and tradition, and on the other hand without exposing the Church to Christian ridicule.

The process unfolds on a rather large background. The first type, at least in, so to speak, a logical order, of Christian thinking upon the revelation concerning God and His Son was that of the Jewish Christians. And on Jewish Christianity as a specific type of thinking, Fr. Daniélou has written his Théologie du judéo-christianisme. And as he shows, in a series of works — the Ascensio Isaiae, Pastor Hermae, in Irenaeus (in the Demonstratio Evangelica), and in Origen — there are to be found traces of a conception, and an explicit conception, of the Son and the Holy Ghost as angels. The passage in Is 6:3 in which the two seraphim with six wings continually cry, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth", is interpreted of the Father as God, and the Son and Holy Ghost as the two seraphim. In other words, Jewish Christianity was an attempt to understand the Christian revelation within the symbols of the OT. The person who first went into this matter of the angelology of the Jewish Christians was Barbel in his Christos Angelos. Werner, in his Entstehung des christlichen Dogmas, held the view that for the Jewish Christians the Son and Holy Ghost were not God, were merely creatures. And that, I think, has generally been rejected as imposing upon the Jewish Christians Greek categories which they simply did not have. What they were doing was conceiving the Son and Holy Ghost as persons, namely as angels, and angels of the highest possible order, with the greatest proximity to God. It was an attempt to conceive the Trinity within the symbolism of the OT.

Another type of symbolic, or rather pseudo-symbolic, thinking was Christian gnosticism. As you know, there are four types of gnosticism: pagan, Jewish, the gnosticism (or traces of it) found in the NT, and finally, heretical Christian sects of maybe the second century, in which the speculative interest was dominant. As Karl Prumm says of them in his article in LTK, the fundamental aspiration or inspiration of Christian gnosticism is represented by a passage from the Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria: "Up to baptism, the Fates are true; but after baptism the astrologers no longer predict our lives. But it is not only the washing that brings us to liberty, but also knowledge (gnôsis) of what we were, what we have become, where we were, or were cast, whither we hurry, whence we have been redeemed, what is generation and what regeneration." The gnostics had a speculative interest. But it was a speculative interest that was satisfied with a pseudo-symbolic type of thinking. Their symbols were not properly sensible; they were using abstract terms, numerology and so on, to cover over profundities and pseudo-profundities. They had a fantastic conception of the divinity as consisting of thirty eons, with all sorts of psychological and other analogies running through it. They could prove everything in their doctrine — and did — by appealing to the spiritual sense. The parable of the vineyard in which the

lord of the vineyard goes out at the first hour, the third, the sixth, the ninth, and the eleventh — if you add those numbers up you get thirty; therefore the Gospels testify that there are thirty eons. Not, of course, to everyone, but to those able to read the scriptures spiritually. And so on all along the line. The Ogdoad and the Decad were proved by the fact that the name 'Jesus' begins with IH, the iota standing for 10 and the eta standing for 8 — 18; and the Eight and the Ten also give you 18. They had endless proofs from Scripture, and they were almost impossible to refute, simply because they were fantastic. Irenaeus is full of this constantly recurring fantastic exegesis of the gnostic sects. If he is not refuting it, at least he is reprimanding them for what they're saying. There we have two of the types of thinking, the Jewish symbolic interpretation of the NT in terms of the symbols of the Old, and a gentile Greek interpretation of the NT in terms of the pseudo-symbolism of gnosticism.

There are also more rationalistic types. The Marcionites had no interest whatever in the emanations; but they give the impression of being anti-Semitic, and they conceived the God of the OT as a fierce, repellent deity from whom we have been redeemed by the God of the NT. Redemption, then, is from the wicked God of the Old Testament by the good God of the New. And they also practised the Higher Criticism: they accepted Paul and Luke, nothing else, and not all of them. Finally, there were the obvious antitheses with regard to our Lord. The Sabellians acknowledged His divinity but denied distinction from God the Father; the Adoptionists admitted that the Son was distinct from God the Father and concluded that He was only a man.

Now these are, as it were, background problems; they were not problems within the Greek Church. They represented rather the lunatic fringe, so to speak, people that were not within the mainstream of thought of Christianity. But there also were problems within the orthodox or general stream of Christianity. M. Spanneut has published in Paris in 1956 Le stoïcisme des Pères de l'Eglise, de Clément de Rome à Clément d'Alexandrie. He has found continuous similarities, analogies, and contacts with stoicism in Christian writers from Clement of Rome to Clement of Alexandria. Just how much this is due to the influence of stoicism and how much it is a matter of just ordinary human nature would be a difficult question to solve. Probably much more of the latter than stoic influence; they used stoic categories. But there was an influence of what we would call today 'naive realism'.

In Irenaeus there is the traditional concept of God: God is the God of the Old Testament and of the New, against the Marcionites; the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and of the Prophets; the God of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the God of the Apostolic Preaching, the God that is believed by the Church. But he also undertakes to prove that there is only one God, and his argument is largely that of the container and the contained. There must be one God that has dominion over absolutely everything, that contains everything; and it is very difficult not to find in Irenaeus a rather materialist conception behind his proof of the unity of God.

The same thing appears in Tertullian. In Tertullian the Son undoubtedly is God. Why? Because God, though He is, a spirit, He certainly is a body; otherwise He wouldn't be real. A spirit to be real has to have a body, has to be a substance. And out of the divine substance

there proceeds a spirit informed by the divine Word; and that is the Son. It's what has been called Tertullian's organic monotheism. Father Son and Holy Ghost are, as it were, organic parts of one Divinity. And behind that is the type of naive realism to which Tertullian perhaps did not consciously subscribe, but de facto it was the way in which he thought. Because of that, Tertullian can hold that the Son is not eternal but came forth in time. Whether he is eternal or not is of no importance in settling His divinity; He is divine if He is made of the divine Matter, the divine Stuff. The Son can be subordinate: the Father can give the orders and the Son execute them; and that won't be against the divinity of the Son, because it isn't whether the Son is subordinate or superior that settles whether He is divine, but what He's made of. Is He made of the divine Stuff or not? Now Tertullian doesn't put it quite so bluntly as that, but that's what his position comes to. In other words, when Tertullian makes his subordinationist utterances, for us they imply denial of the divinity. But they do not imply denial of divinity in Tertullian's mind.

In Clement of Alexandria there is a series of passages from the Excerpta ex Theodoto ("Excerpts from Theodotus"; Theodotus was a gnostic, and the Excerpta are a notebook of Clement's, and in that notebook part is Clement's own thinking and part quotations from Theodotus) — in that work, in parts that scholars attribute to Clement himself and not to quotations, Clement is quite clearly involved in a naive realism. He speaks of the angels of the little ones, who continuously gaze upon the face of the Father; and "Blessed are the pure of heart, because they see God". But how could there be a face of the Father to see if He has no shape? The Apostle, then, knew about celestial bodies that are beautiful and intelligent, when he said, "Other is the glory of the heavenly beings and other is that of the terrestrial, other that of the angels and other that of the archangels." Compare them with the corporeal bodies we see on earth, and of course they're invisible, they're far too subtle for us to see them; but they're bodies none the less. Similarly the demons; if they had no body, they wouldn't be able to suffer from the fire of hell. And he has a series of arguments — not only philosophical, but some are also from Scripture — to prove that God and the angels and so on have bodies in a sense. This is a confusion of the notion of body with the notion of reality. He argues, as also Irenaeus seems to have argued before him, from the parable of Lazarus. The rich man asks Abraham to have Lazarus dip his finger in a glass of water and place it on his tongue. Well, both Lazarus and the rich man are dead, have departed from the crass bodies of this world. But obviously Lazarus couldn't have a finger to dip in the water and the rich man couldn't have a tongue on which to place the water if they had no bodies at all. There is, then, a great deal of what we would call 'naive realism'. What do you mean by the 'real'? It's what you can put your hand on. And if you extend that idea of the real, if you acknowledge the reality of God, then you have to conceive God in a manner that we should reject.

Now what pulled these thinkers and what pulled the Christian tradition out of that naive realism was the exegetical problem set by the gnostics (less by the Jewish Christians, because they received less attention). Irenaeus makes no systematic effort to get to the roots of gnostic exegesis. He proceeds much as the boxer described by Demosthenes: the barbarian boxer puts his hand up not where the blow is com-

ing, but where he's been hit. In a similar manner Irenaeus is meeting each objection as it arises. But Clement of Alexandria in the eighth book of his Stromateis sets about setting up a systematic type of exegesis. He says that first of all, if you use a name, define it, and define it in terms better known than the name itself. Define it in a way that everyone will accept. And after you have agreed on its definition, ask whether anything corresponding to the name exists. And when you have settled that it exists, inquire about its nature. And then he goes on giving all the precepts of Greek hermeneutics, which he followed.

Now the necessity of that systematic procedure set up by Clement of Alexandria is seen when one thinks of gnostic exegesis. If the only interpretation of Scripture were symbolic, then you could never settle what the symbols are symbols of. And if you're going to say that the symbols are not just symbols of more symbols, then you have to have some idea of reality. And if Clement was to contribute to defeating the gnostic exegesis of Scripture (which reduced it to nonsense, really), he had to appeal to some reality, and he had to appeal to some method that settled just what the real was. You have in the exegetic problem the implicit philosophic problem, "What do you mean by reality?" And that problem of reality implicit in the exegetic problem was met by the Alexandrians by turning to Platonism. The idea that the early Christians held a spiritualist philosophy in the contemporary sense of the term is not only weakened by the examples I have indicated, but if you take Origen's De Principiis, Book I, he treats of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. And his treatment of God the Father, which runs over pages, is devoted entirely to proving that God the Father is a purely spiritual being, and making it absolutely clear what he meant by 'spiritual'. Moreover, Origen conceived the generation of the Son from the Father in a purely spiritual fashion. The Son proceeds from the Father by contemplation and love, an eternal contemplation and love. But Origen was involved in his Platonism (it was a middle Platonism, pretty similar to that of Albinus), and while he conceived the Father as the absolute good and God simpliciter, he conceived the Son as good and God by participation. The Son is Wisdom itself and Truth itself and Revelation itself and Resurrection itself, where the 'itself' refers to the Platonist abstract idea; but the Father is something greater than these. On the other hand, the Son is not God, Divinity itself, but a participation of Divinity, not Goodness itself, but a participation of Goodness. That was Origen's Platonist solution to the problem raised by Sabellianism on the one hand and Adoptionism on the other. In Origen, naive realism has been transcended, but it has been transcended in the direction of Platonism. While Tertullian held the divinity of the Son, and truly held it, on false philosophic assumptions, Origen has a conception of the Son as a really subordinate being, not 'true God' in the sense of Nicea. We have moved to the second step in which philosophic issues were involved in Christian thinking.

A century later the Arians had brought the question back to the Hebraic and Christian categories: "Is the Son Creator or is He creature?" And they argued that the Son is not unbegotten. He is begotten, He is generated, He has an origin, He depends on someone else; therefore He cannot be the First Principle, He cannot be the Creator, He cannot be God in the proper sense of the term. On the other hand, in Athanasius, who represented and defended the Council of Nicea, the distinction, which had been clarified earlier and then obscured by the

Arians, between agennêtos and agenêtos (the first is from gennaô, 'to generate', the second from gignomai, 'to become'. What is agenêton is increatedum, not created; what is agennêton has not been generated) — in Athanasius one finds fundamental reflections on the notion of creation, on the notion of God as He-who-is. The Greeks, Aristotle and Plato, had spoken of to on, what-is; but with the OT, the LXX, Athanasius speaks of ho ôn, He-who-is, the masculine of the present participle of the verb 'to be'. From the fact that the Son is indeed not ungenerated (agennêtos) it doesn't follow that He has been created, that He is not agenêtos. You have fundamental reflections on the being of God in Athanasius' refutation of Arius, in his distinction between agennêtos and agenêtos, in his reflection on ho ôn, and most of all in his notion of the consubstantiality of the Son. What does consubstantiality mean? Well, it has several meanings; but the meaning in Alexander of Alexandria, who condemned Arius, in Athanasius, and in the Christian tradition, is put very briefly in the formula, "The same statements are made of the Son as of the Father, apart from the name 'Father'." As it is put in the Preface of the Blessed Trinity in the Mass, "Quod enim de tua gloria, revelante te, credimus, hoc de Filio tuo, hoc de Spiritu Sancto, sine differentia discretionis sentimus." "What we believe about your glory, the kābôd Yahweh, through your revelation, all that is known about the divine glory, the same of the Son, the same of the Holy Ghost, without any distinction, is what we hold." And note the difference between that formula, which was finally crystallized in the Latin Preface to the Mass, and Tertullian's position — the difference between that naive realist conception of the divinity of the Son and the conception implicit in Nicea and explicit in Athanasius and subsequent writers. For Tertullian (and not only Tertullian, of course; that same type of thinking runs through all the writers of the Western Church, and a good deal in the East too, that naive realism) the Son is divine if He's made of the same matter as God the Father, of the same stuff. Whether He comes out early or late, whether He is subordinate or not, makes no difference; He is still divine because He is made of the right stuff. And that is a possible meaning also of 'consubstantial'. But on the other hand, when you take the real as WHAT IS KNOWN BY A TRUE AFFIRMATION, then the Son is God if you affirm the same things about the Son as about the Father. The difference there is the difference between two realisms. Is a thing real because of what it's made of, its matter, its stuff — is that what constitutes it as reality? And that by a contact with that reality you know the real? Or is the real what you know when you truly affirm? There is an antithesis here between two meanings of the word 'realism', a fundamental antithesis, and there is an historical transition from one to the other as one follows the evolution of Christian theology in the early centuries.

Now that same realism, the realism of judgement, of truth (where 'truth' means not the truth of saying but the truth of affirming) is at the root not only of all dogmatic definitions ("Si quis dixerit..., anathema sit"), but also at the root of the whole scholastic method in its fundamental conception. Abélard in his Sic et Non with regard to, I think, 158 topics, quoted the Fathers and the Scriptures both for and against these 158 propositions: "Yes, that is so; no, it is not." Exactly the same procedure had been used by the canon lawyer Gratian in his Concordia Discordantium Canonum. Gilbert de la Porrée defines the

question. He says there is a question if, and only if, sound authorities and good reasons can be given for and against both sides of a contradiction. And the question is the fundamental tool of mediaeval thought. It has become somewhat formalized and dead, at least it seems dead, for example, in the Summa of St. Thomas, where automatically there is the videtur quod non with three reasons on one side, the sed contra with usually one, sometimes two, reasons for the other side, the response, and then the solutions. But if you want to see St. Thomas using the quaestio as a tool that's fully alive, take De Veritate, q. 24, a. 12, where he is contradicting the position he had held in the Sentences. You will find that in the videtur quod non there are 24 authorities, and they're all authorities, and they're all against what he held in the Sentences; and then eleven more on the other side. His solution runs through about nine columns in the Vivès edition. But implicit in that method of the question the issue always is saying what is true. It's the same type of thinking as you have in the dogmas: "Si quis dixerit..., anathema sit." It's the same type of thinking as you have in the meaning of 'homocousion', when 'homocousion' is taken not as identity of matter, but identity of predication.

Now, what is the origin of that Christian realism, the realism of the true affirmation? Clearly, it is the scriptural word of God. It is the word of God as a command in the Law; it is the word of God as a correction in the Prophets. It is the precept of our Lord to the Apostles in the Sermon on the Mount: "Let your speech be 'Yea, yea; nay, nay!'" "Sit sermo vester 'Est, est; non, non!'" It is the word of God as conceived by St. Paul in Gal 1: "If an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel different from the one I have preached to you, let him be anathema." The word of God! To say it is not true would be a blasphemy; to say it does not regard reality would be an impious trifling. And those implications of the word of God as received by the Christian communion are the real foundations and origins, I would suggest, of Christian realism.

I thank you for your very kind attention.