THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN REALISM

A lecture delivered by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., at Regis College, Toronto, Canada, September 8, 1961

The question on which I have chosen to speak to you can be approached in four different ways. The title will probably suggest to many the debate that began about thirty years ago in France and Belgium 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 did not want any confusion whatever of philosophy and theology, any mixture of

their procedures, 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. (Recently Gilson has returned to the issue in his book Le philosophe et la théologie.) In 1933 Maurice Blondel took issue with both Bréhier and Gilson. He denied that there was any parallel whatever between philosophy and mathematics, and asserted consequently that it was invalid to argue that there is no more a Catholic philosophy than there is a Catholic mathematics. He considered Gilson's introduction of the historical

element to be 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 you have three opinions there, and I think a great deal can be said for each of them, 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.

A second approach would be to put the issue in more abstract terms, in more specifically philosophic terms, namely, "What precisely do you mean by a 'realism'?" And, as I have discovered, there are those who seem to think that, if you hold intellect

to be intelligent, then you are 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

l.c. is the ǿne 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

l.c. person -- the ǿne '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. In such a conception 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. Further, the revelation of our Lord in the Gospels sets him 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 Old Testament about God, in the New Testament 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, worked out by the Fathers of the Church, that we are concerned tonight.

The Fathers, 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 New Testament conception of God to the conception of one divine substance in three persons; and again, from the New Testament 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 both historical and theological discussion for a number of centuries, in fact, since Petavius. (In Scholastik, 1958, A. Grillmeier has two long articles

dealing with the history of that discussion, and contemporary efforts along the same 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 without, on the one hand, departing from Scripture and tradition, or, on the other, exposing the Church to ridicule.

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The process unfolds on a rather large background. The first type of Christian thinking upon the revelation concerning God and His Son was that of the Jewish Christians. (At least it is first in, so to speak, a logical order.) On Jewish Christianity, as a specific

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type of thinking, J. 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 Old Testament. 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, but 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 Old Testament.

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 New Testament, and finally, heretical Christian sects of maybe the second century, in which the speculative interest was dominant. As Karl Prümm says of them in his article in Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche, 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. An example is 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. Similarly, the Ogdoad and the Decad were proved by the fact that the name 'Jesus' begins with I H, the iota standing for 10 and the eta standing for 8. Gnosticism 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. There we have two of the types of thinking, the Jewish symbolic interpretation of the

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New Testament in terms of the symbols of the Old, and a gentile Greek interpretation of the New Testament in terms of the pseudo-symbolism of gnosticism.

There are also more rationalistic types. The Marcionites had no interest whatever in the emanation of eons; but they give the impression of being anti-Semitic, and they conceived the God of the Old Testament as a fierce, repellent deity from whom we have been redeemed by the God of the New Testament. Redemption, then, is from the wicked God of the Old Testament by the good God of the New. 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, those who were not within the mainstream of thought of Christianity. But there also were problems within the orthodox or general stream of Christianity. M. Spanneut 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 of this is due to the influence of stoicism and how much it is a matter of ordinary human nature would be a difficult question to solve.

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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 Ireneus 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 Ireneus 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 Ireneus a rather materialist conception behind his proof of the unity of God.