

# The Gilson Event in North America

L E O R. W A R D

WHEN ETIENNE GILSON (1884-1978) came on stage to lecture, he came like an invading army, authorized and perfectly justified in doing what he was doing and in taking over. He spoke as one commanding great areas and centuries in the intellectual life of mankind. By two generations of hard work and the "meditation" he recommended to his students, he had come into possession of medieval philosophy as a whole and in its roots, and he was deeply convinced that a grasp of medieval philosophy, so far from being something esoteric, merely nice, a sort of decoration, was essential to understanding and appreciating modern and contemporary philosophy.

Gilson gave many series of public lectures, among them the William James Lectures at Harvard in 1936. His lectures there were prestigious; they were on the unity of philosophical experience and were part of the fruit he had gathered from years of studying sources. A person attending those lectures reported that Gilson kept a large audience spellbound lecture after lecture. That is what Gilson always did, holding forth majesterially on the development of basic philosophic themes and issues in centuries often called the dark ages and on the crucial difference that, so he claimed, Christian beliefs have made to philosophic understanding; and presumably the full potential of those beliefs for understanding has not been reached and perhaps to the end of time will never be reached. "Who will be able to comprehend the thunder of His greatness?" (*Job*, 26).

The Gilson event in North America began on a sort of full-time and permanent basis when he and the well-advised Basilian Fathers set up an institute of medieval studies at St. Michael's College in Toronto University. The Institute was a co-product, Gilson's and the Basilians', and Gilson re-

mained for a generation a chief inspirer and attraction at St. Michael's, its greatest scholar and teacher, and naturally its director and pace-setter. Whoever studied there in those years studied with and under Gilson, and I doubt that any of them ever got over the Gilson virus. All were happy to become Gilson products and Gilson fans.

The Gilson way and style, the Gilson direction and inspiration, this, along with invaluable collaboration from Jacques Maritain's lectures all over North and South America and Maritain's publications, and from Yves Simon's teaching at Notre Dame and Chicago University and Josef Pieper's delightful and depth-insightful lectures and publications—all this composite, massive and unified philosophical barrage was the biggest and most impressive philosophical event that ever hit North American Catholic colleges and universities. Some disciples of those big four more or less effectively carry on the masters' work.

Philosophy occasionally had some great teachers in Catholic colleges, but for the most part it had been rather tame and unexciting. Commonly it was said to be a study of first principles and first causes in the light of reason; it offered rather facile refutations, sometimes on a premise of "absurdum est," of various isms such as Kantianism and evolutionism; and using summary "manuals," it was fond of calling itself Thomism and scholasticism. Almost all of it was likely, especially when taught by Roman-trained priests, to be rather innocent of sources and texts, whether of the Greeks, the medievals, moderns or contemporaries. It did not always look like a careful search for wisdom. To the assertion made in the 1930's that students go to college to get a philosophy, a priest ex-teacher replied, "Good God, man! we've got a philosophy!"

Gilson and St. Michael's were like a shot in the arm for philosophy at North American Catholic colleges and universities. These began sending choice and mature students to St. Michael's, and it was almost entirely to Catholic colleges that the Gilson trained and inspired students returned. Gilson himself was in demand as a lecturer, delivering book-length series at various universities such as Harvard, Virginia and Indiana, and also the Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen. However, few non-Catholic centers of learning in America wanted his students, and perhaps few of those students appeared to be big enough and impressive and free enough to join the faculty at places like Chicago, Duke or Michigan University. As we shall see, there was and there still is a formidable hurdle which the ruck of American universities, church-related and others, have been unable or unwilling to hazard.

Some of his students became great teachers, and he himself was noted as both historian and philosopher. Have any of his students carried on at relatively his pace and given promise of eventually approaching his level? A Gilson does not appear every day or every generation. Charlemagne was greedy and ambitious, he wanted a dozen Jeromes and Augustines pointblank, but Alcuin replied that God had given only two such men in several centuries. We may have to wait some generations to reap the great good of the Gilson event in North America. Meantime, we know that it has trained and disciplined students to work and to respect sources and has inspired them, lifted their professional sights, raised their consciousness and afforded them a sense of association with achievement and greatness.

For his part, Gilson merely happened to discover medieval philosophy. One of his teachers, the distinguished positivist, Lévy Bruhl, advised him to read St. Thomas as a prelude to the study of Descartes. "He sent me on a tour of medieval philosophy....He did not think I would stay there." As a student of medieval thinkers, Gilson said that he learned first of all that there is no one

mainline medieval philosophy which might advisedly be given an overall name such as "scholasticism." Secondly, medieval thinkers were professional theologians who now and then had need of philosophy, but for them philosophy was in every instance the handmaid of theology. "Not a single one of the great theologians has not said so." Thirdly, rational and natural philosophical understanding, even on its highest levels, can be aided and over and over has been aided by faith, that is, by revealed truth. Fourthly, St. Anselm's classic words and Duns Scotus' telltale prayer were as if predictable. Anselm said: "I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand." Believing on God's word such and such matters, other things being equal, I will be in a better position to understand at least some of them than if I had not believed; faith tutors understanding. That is Anselm's famous declaration, and that is also what Scotus said. Setting out to write a book on God (*de principio primo*), Scotus said that he already believed on God's word to Moses that God is pure being: "this I believe, but this I would also know." Help me to know, starting from my belief. The implied notion of the relation of faith to philosophy is one of the constants in medieval thinking: faith can lead to and enrich understanding. Hence the tremendous axioms: *Fides quaerens intellectum* and *Credo ut intelligam*.

Hence, too, Gilson's summary in *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (1936): "I call Christian every philosophy which, though keeping the two orders distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation an indispensable auxiliary to reason." Gilson's and many others' favorite illustration is in the revealed statement that God is Yahweh, *He who is, I am who am*, the identical revealed doctrine that Scotus in his prayer said that he believed indeed, but if possible he would like to understand. The two orders of reason and Revelation kept formally distinct, but Revelation on occasion being in fact an indispensable aid to reason. The Yahweh idea, that God absolutely is, was expressed by the minor

English poet, Christopher Smart (1722-1770): "Tell them, I AM, Jehovah said/to Moses.../All Nature.../Replied, 'O Lord, THOU ART.'" The late Michael Polanyi stated the faith and understanding issue in simple terms: if a child did not believe that the words people utter had meaning, the child would never even learn to talk.

Maritain stressed the Yahweh illustration, of course, and with Gilson he added Creation; and Maritain also cited sin as offense against God; and he mentioned human nature which, though intrinsically consistent, is open to the supernatural. He used the word Christian for any philosophy which, as he said, develops its rational exigencies in a Christian climate.

If, as our reading suggests, Gilson was so convincing and was lecturing and writing on a well documented basis, why has his and others' summary in terms of a "Christian philosophy" been so commonly disregarded in our time or even considered as an outrageous attack on philosophy itself? That is a big historical and psychological question, and Gilson might forgive us for merely suggesting two elementary reasons for the ordinary brush-off of the "Christian philosophy" idea. One reason is habit. Those four words are simple. But a mind-set of three or four centuries is not simple, as Blondel found out when in 1893 he deliberately raised the question of man's mind being insufficient to come fully into its own, to be fully itself, unless it has supernatural support. People unused to such a theory were incensed; they still are.

Another reason for the skittishness is fear. People are always shy and scared of some particular positions, notably ideas that suggest bad form, the old-fashioned and out of date; such positions are espoused at social risk. Philosophies come into style and demand adherents. If a philosophy, an institution or theory can be pegged as "medieval," it is sure to be decried; at least it looks antiquarian and also authoritarian, power-laden and dogmatic, not to mention dictatorial. Things even half that wicked always ap-

pear bad and often are bad, and the life of inquiry and reason is a priori bound to keep clear of them. In a free-for-all discussion of whether, let us say on Gilson's formulation, there is or was or even can be a "Christian philosophy," a distinguished Christian who was a professor of chemistry at an elite university closed the question with three words: "I hope not!" What he meant was nothing unusual or recondite: "Keep faith and philosophy sealed off airtight from each other. Chemistry learns nothing from the Bible and medieval theology, and neither does philosophy. Don't raise the question! It scares me!"

Fear and habit effectively combine to rule out in advance the question of whether there is or ever has been any positive contribution of revealed learnings to philosophical understanding. The result is that in most American colleges and seminaries the general over-all assumption has long ago erected a wall that disqualifies the question. In a long and happy experience with members of the American Philosophical Association, I have seen or thought I have seen how difficult it would be, given the fear-and-habit complex, even to raise the issue of a possible "Christian philosophy." Yet whether as Jews or Christians or unbelievers, many of those members may, in this or that matter, actually be bona fide "Christian philosophers," perhaps on a Gilson pattern. I would say that of course many of them really are, but because of fear and habit, they would not like to know that they are. Gilson, Maritain and Pieper would advise them: Look again and as rationally as you like, and it may be that more can be grasped and understood rationally than you had hoped or feared or thought. In regard to any such frightened people, Gilson's literal words were tart. In *The Philosopher and Theology* (1961), he said: "It is permissible to feel slightly sceptical when a believer pretends to philosophize in freedom from all religious influence....I have never conceived the possibility of a split conscience divided between faith and philosophy."