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GILSON AS CHRISTIAN HUMANIST

In chapter 1, paragraph 19, of his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, quoting Pope Paul VI, Pope Benedict XVI tells us that, among other things, the vision of development as a human vocation today requires “the deep thought and reflection of wise men in search of a new humanism which will enable modern man to find himself anew.” In this paper I am going to suggest that the intellectual life of Étienne Gilson constituted just the sort of search for a new humanism about which the Pope speaks, that Gilson’s scholarly work was part of a new renaissance, a new humanism that Gilson thought was demanded by the precarious civilizational crisis of the modern West after World Wars I and II. In sum, I wish to argue that, more than anything else, Gilson was a renaissance humanist scholar who consciously worked in the tradition of renaissance humanists before him, but did so to expand our understanding of the notion of “renaissance” scholarship and to create his own brand of Christian humanism to deal with problems distinctive to his age.

Anyone familiar with the revived interest in Thomistic studies that happened during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will likely be struck by the sharp contrast in writing-style between the manual Thomists who first started this revival and that of Gilson. A chief purpose of this paper is to argue that the radical difference in style is connected to part to a kind of Christian humanism, renaissance thinking, that Gilson developed as part of his distinctive style of doing historical research and of philosophizing.

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In referring to Gilson as a renaissance humanist, as did Gilson himself, I am predicating the term “renaissance” in a wide sense. As is well known, Gilson was chiefly responsible among scholars of the twentieth century for demonstrating as bogus the modern prejudice that attempted to reserve the term “renaissance” to a period of Western intellectual history that occurred from around AD 1350 to 1600. In my opinion Gilson’s critique of this specious intellectual reductionism was part of a conscious attempt on his part to develop his own brand of Christian humanism rooted in a way of philosophizing common to the High Middle Ages. As he saw it, the celebrated Italian renaissance was only one of a series of intellectual renaissances that had occurred in the West prior to the fourteenth century and heavily depended on the scholarly work of many prior centuries.

In referring to Gilson as a humanist, I am predicating the term “humanist,” in a two-fold way, in accord with two chief ways that I think professional philosophers today generally understand the term “humanism.” In these senses, Gilson the humanist was (1) a student of classical literary, artistic, and scientific works of Ancient Greece and Rome. This is the sense in which thinkers such as Paul Oskar Kristeller often use the term to refer to the humanism of the Italian Renaissance. Professional philosophers also use it to refer to (2) a way of studying that places emphasis on (a) the centrality or dignity of the human person, (b) subjects of study that relate to such centrality or dignity, or (c) ways of engaging in such a study that gives a special dignity to the human subject as agent doing the studying. Reasonable justification exists to predicate “humanism” of Gilson’s scholarship in both philosophical senses of the term. Gilsonian humanism has about it the quality of a wonder about the whole of classical wisdom from the ancient Israelites to the High Middle Ages and beyond; it also emphasizes those subjects that relate to the person’s centrality and dignity and the way of studying such subjects such that it gives a special dignity to the agent studying.

In the first sense, similar to the Italian renaissance humanists and many of the renaissance humanists of the High French Middle Ages,

including St. Thomas, in the tradition of St. Bernard of Chartres, Gilson engaged in a study of the classics to revive aspects of higher learning in his time, get truth from classical philosophical and theological works, and build upon these truths to see further and deeper than his predecessors.

In the second sense, Gilson's humanism is a way of philosophizing within theology, what Gilson often called a "Christian philosophy." As a Christian theology utilizing the classical mode of philosophizing that traces back to Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, and the pre-Socratics, Gilson's humanism emphasizes the centrality of the human person, the subjects it studies that have a direct bearing on the centrality and dignity of the human person, and the way it studies these subjects increases the dignity of the philosophical act.

I call attention to this issue of Gilson's scholarly humanism for several reasons. One is that, despite its evident influence on Gilson's scholarship, his way of attacking philosophical problems, I do not think many Thomists have thought about it as a form of humanism. Another is that, while later twentieth-century and early twenty-first century scholars might have largely ignored this quality of Gilson's intellectual life, early twentieth-century thinkers would likely have found it glaring, so glaring that they might have found Gilson suspect because of it.

A brief review of Gilson's educational background gives insight into why a general interest in classical studies (1) should have been a main influence in the way Gilson approached scholarship and (2) would provide for him the wider context within which to make intelligible the thought of others to himself and his audience. As described by Gilson's authoritative biographer Lawrence K. Shook, Gilson's formal education that took its start at home under the long-distance supervision of Ursuline sister Mother Saint-Dieudonne was immersed in the liberal arts. After this, in 1890, he entered the Christian Brothers' run parish school of Ste-Clotilde where, among other things, he received educational grounding in Latin, catechism, and love of language. In 1895, Gilson left Ste-Clotilde to start seven

years of education at the Catholic secondary school, Petit Séminaire de Notre-Dame-des-Champs. There he underwent rigorous training in classical (“humanistic”) studies that included ancient Greek, Latin, Roman and French history, mathematics, physical science, liturgy, and music.

Gilson left Notre-Dame-des-Champs in 1902 to attend a year of studies at the celebrated Lycée Henri IV. While there, Gilson was introduced to philosophy by Professor Henri Dereux and attended Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s course on David Hume. Gilson graduated from Lycée Henri IV in 1903 with a bachelor’s diploma and certification from the Faculty of Letters at the University of Paris that would permit him to continue his studies at the Sorbonne.

Gilson enrolled in the Sorbonne in 1904 and completed his studies there in three years. Especially memorable to Gilson during this time were a course on Descartes he took under Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and a set of lectures that Henri Bergson gave at the Collège de France. Lévy-Bruhl’s course so strongly influenced Gilson that he decided to write his doctoral thesis on Descartes under Lévy-Bruhl’s direction. Other major thinkers with whom Gilson studied during this time included Émile Durkheim and Victor Delbos.

Jumping ahead from this period of formal education to that of teacher and public lecturer, as long ago as 1926, when he made his first visit to North America to participate in an international congress in Montreal on *Education and Citizenship*, Gilson was bothered by the conviction that there were not enough good students at the time capable of doing advanced work in philosophy. In 1929, in part to help solve this problem, he established his Institute of Mediaeval Studies (later to become The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies [PIMS]) at the University of Toronto. But I think Gilson’s interest in founding this famed Institute went deeper than this.

Throughout his adult intellectual life, Gilson was convinced that, during the later Middle Ages, under the influence chiefly of Latin Averroism, Western culture had suffered a psychological rupture between faith and reason that has continued until modern times and has

caused a political secularization of modern education and an increased propensity to engage in global war. In *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, he tells any historian who might investigate the sources of “modern rationalism” that an uninterrupted chain of influence exists from the Averroistic tradition of the Masters of Arts of Paris to the European freethinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (the so-called “Age of Reason”).

Accompanying this fracture across the centuries, there was, Gilson thought, an ever-increasing loss of the sense of a classical Western, philosophically-based humanism rooted in what, in his book *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, Gilson had called the “Western Creed.” He was equally convinced that these problems could only be reversed by recovering a true Christian humanism in education. Without recovering an understanding of, and belief in, this Western Creed, Western culture, Gilson thought, would collapse.

In my opinion, as a result of his experiences during World War I and his research into the influence of Latin Averroism on the subsequent rupture between faith and reason at the tail end of the Middle Ages, part of the reason Gilson founded this Pontifical Institute was to counteract the growth of the influence on Western culture of what I have labeled “neo-Averroism,” the contemporary Western tendency to maintain the rupture between faith and reason that Latin Averroism had initiated. I maintain that Gilson thought he could best combat this mindset through a philosophically-based humanism that defended the Western Creed. Explicitly or not, Gilson established the Pontifical Institute, I think, as a kind of renaissance institute similar to that of Lorenzo Valla’s Platonic Academy, with the express purpose of using medieval renaissance wisdom to counteract the secularization of the West under the centuries-old philosophical deconstruction initiated by the Italian renaissance and the neo-Averroism of the Enlightenment counter-renaissance.

In support of my claim, I refer to the fact that around mid-December, 1933, Gilson presented a series of three lectures on *Le société chrétienne universelle* at Salle Saint-Sulpice, Montreal. At this

time, Gilson started to become convinced that, by decreeing faith and reason to be irreconcilable and by separating the political world into one empire directed by the pope and another by the prince, Latin Averroism had fractured the medieval Christian hope of a Christian social order rooted in moral law, justice, and charity.

Shortly after this, in 1934, under the influence of Fr. Phelan and Basilian Fr. Henry Carr, Gilson went to Rome with them to hold meetings with the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities to discuss a charter for the Institute. After these meetings, in late March of the same year, Jacques Maritain accompanied Gilson to a private audience with Pope Pius XI. This meeting put the request for a charter firmly on the Congregation's agenda. After a provisional refusal in 1936, final approval came on 21 November 1939.

Beyond this, in 1934, Gilson published *La théologie mystique de saint Bernard*. Also in 1934, in preparing a policy statement for another journal, *Sept*, which his friend Fr. Bernadot had just established, to unify French Catholics and reverse the French republic's educational program of secularization, Gilson repeated this theme of overcoming the political divorce between faith and reason. This policy statement then served as background for a collection of articles entitled *Pour un ordre catholique* that he published in *Sept* related to education and political and social problems.

Gilson's first article in this collection, *En marge de Chamfort*, attacked French intellectuals for having formed their own secular priesthood for controlling politics. His second article was a review of G. K. Chesterton's biography of St. Thomas Aquinas, *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*, in which Gilson marveled at Chesterton's ability to penetrate into the essence of Thomas's thought. According to Shook, reading Chesterton caused Gilson to realize that, just as Chesterton had seen English Protestant historians writing history backwards, from the perspective of their understanding of the Reformation, "Gilson now saw French historians writing it from the vantage point of

seventeenth-century rationalism,”¹ or according to what, once again, I call “neo-Averroism.”

I also refer to comments Shook makes about an article that Gilson had written shortly before the outbreak of World War II in 1939, *Erasme: citoyen du monde*. Commenting on the article, Shook says that, at heart, Gilson was an Erasmian humanist who

wanted to end all wars and to liberate men to work out their salvation in the context of personal freedom. He believed that this could be achieved through the kind of education that fostered the acquisition of moral virtue through the writings of Cicero and Seneca, and through the teachings of Christ.²

According to Shook, during this period, Gilson’s main motivation was to drive home to his Institute students that in humanism lay the best antidote to the venom of war. For Gilson medieval universalism, or ‘true humanism’ as Maritain called it, held the key to the ultimate health in the human condition.³

Because Gilson thought that, to be of use, students needed to analyze Christian humanism philosophically, he thought he had to present humanism within the context of the lives of men who lived it, historical humanists, humanist intellectuals continuing a tradition of classical learning through a series of intellectual renaissances, the high point of which had been the Medieval Renaissance.

Hence, in the fall, 1939, Shook says that, after publishing his monograph *Dante et la philosophie* (Paris), Gilson offered to his Toronto students a public course of twelve lectures on *Roman Classical Culture from Cicero to Erasmus* in which he led his students through the transmission of classical humanism to Christianity through a series of renaissances covering the eighth through the fifteenth centuries.

¹ Lawrence K. Shook, *Étienne Gilson* (Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, The Gilson Series 6, 1984), p. 218. Most of the preceding biographical information about Gilson is taken from Shook.

² *Id.*, p. 254.

³ *Id.*, p. 239.

Shook states that as World War II came to an end, Gilson became increasingly devoted to realizing the possibility of that *ordre catholique* he had advocated in the 1930s. He was convinced that

German hitlerism, Russian communism, Italian and Spanish fascism and American Deweyism had stood in the way then: each of them had focused on the production of their own brand of citizen, and none of them had seen a pressing need for the teaching of moral and intellectual virtue. Now... real changes were finally possible.⁴

To address these changes, in 1945, Gilson wrote an article for *Le monde* entitled *Instruire ou éduquer?* in which he argued for the need to (1) have greater concern for students as individuals, not prospective adherents to a political cause, and (2) familiarize students from infancy with moral virtues of the individual such as honor, duty, justice, and piety.

He quickly followed this article with four others that had the same keynote theme:

The first step of any totalitarian regime is to seize the schools in order to have exclusive monopoly over shaping tomorrow's citizens.⁵

In these articles, Gilson sought to focus educators' attention on inculcating personal virtue, not the power of movements. He entitled them: (1) *Hitler fera-t-il notre révolution?*, (2) *La circulaire 45 ou: comment l'on se propose de pervertir la vérité*, (3) *La révolution ou l'amitié redressera la Cité*, and (4) *La schisme national*. He published the articles in Stanislas Fumet's religiously-oriented journal *Hebdomadaire du temps présent*.

About a month after publishing these articles, Gilson published *Pour une éducation nationale* in *La vie intellectuelle*. He argued therein that free education must include religion. In another article published around this same time in *La croix*, entitled *La liberté de l'enseignement en Angleterre*, Gilson expressed his admiration for the open British conformist and non-conformist educational policy in contrast to France's closed State-controlled one.

⁴ Id., p. 254.

⁵ Id.

On 15 March 1945, he spoke before a packed meeting of *La Jeunesse Intellectuelle* in La Grande Salle de la Mutualité. As a result of these educational works, Gilson started to correspond with many of the leading intellectuals in post-liberation France and to become recognized as a spokesman for them. As a result, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs selected him to join his friend Jacques Maritain as part of the French delegation to the 1945 San Francisco meeting to plan the United Nations charter, which was signed on 26 June of that year.

After returning to Toronto for a few months in anticipation of teaching his fall courses, Gilson was informed that the French Foreign Ministry had named him to as a participant in the October and November 1945 London conference designed to create the constitution for what would later become UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. Gilson served on the committee that drafted UNESCO's constitution.

During his stay in London, Gilson wrote five articles about the conference that were published in *Le monde*. Several others appeared over the next several years. In them, among other things, Gilson expressed his disappointment about the limited roles intellectuals would actually have in UNESCO. He also later expressed disappointment about the behavior of intellectuals at UNESCO's first general conference in Paris in 1946. In a radio discussion in which he took part with several other conference participants after the meeting regarding the question *Can UNESCO Educate for World Understanding?*, Gilson maintained that the world would not be ready for global understanding until university education became more international than it then was. I think this is something Gilson hoped to achieve through his Toronto Institute.

While many people would call Gilson a neo-scholastic, Gilson considered himself to be chiefly a Christian humanist and his Thomism to be a Thomist humanism. He thought that the Christian-inspired humanism of classical Western culture embodied in the Western Creed rooted in classical philosophical realism was the best antidote for the ills of the contemporary world. Hence, he sought to imbue all his

scholarly work, including his famed Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, with this humanism.

On 22 March 2011, the Vatican issued a declaration entitled *Decree on the Reform of Ecclesiastical Studies of Philosophy*, regarding the crucial role of philosophy, especially metaphysics, in training priests. Commenting upon this declaration, Vatican Secretary of Education Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski said that the most fundamental aspects of life are under assault today:

[R]eason itself is menaced by utilitarianism, skepticism, relativism and distrust of reason's ability to know the truth regarding the fundamental problems of life.⁶

He added that science and technology, those icons of what he called materialist philosophies, cannot

sate man's thirst in regard to the ultimate questions: What does happiness consist of? Who am I? Is the world the fruit of chance? What is my destiny? etc. Today, more than ever, the sciences are in need of wisdom.⁷

The Cardinal added that the study of philosophy must be returned to its roots in reason, adding that, because of the present crisis of Christian culture, logic, the discipline that gives structure to reason, has "disappeared."

I think Gilson would largely concur with the Vatican declaration and the statements of Cardinal Grocholewski. But I think he would add that what they propose is not enough. Beyond this return to the study of philosophy and metaphysics, and recovery of the study of logic, I think Gilson would maintain that the West needs that new humanism about which Pope Benedict spoke in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*. In returning to philosophy and metaphysics, the West does not need to return to Cartesian Thomism and to a wisdom that mistakes philosophy for systematic logic. It needs a philosophy, a metaphysics, rooted in sense realism and a new humanism that can properly identify and resolve the fracture between faith and reason initiated by Latin Averro-

⁶ "Vatican: Priests Can't Skip Metaphysics," *ZENIT* (22.03.2011), <http://www.zenit.org/article-32095?l=english>, access: July 16, 2012.

⁷ Id.

ism. It needs an intellectual academy, a circle of scholars, capable of training students to understand and defend their own intellectual tradition, the Western Creed. In short, it needs Gilsonian humanism and a flourishing International Étienne Gilson Society.

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SUMMARY

The author suggests that the intellectual life of Étienne Gilson constituted a new humanism, that Gilson's scholarly work was part of a new renaissance, that a new humanism that Gilson thought is demanded by the precarious civilizational crisis of the modern West after World Wars I and II. He also argues that, more than anything else, Gilson was a renaissance humanist scholar who consciously worked in the tradition of renaissance humanists before him, but did so to expand our understanding of the notion of "renaissance" scholarship and to create his own brand of Christian humanism to deal with problems distinctive to his age. The author shows the specificity of the Christian humanism that Gilson developed as part of his distinctive style of doing historical research and of philosophizing.

KEYWORDS: Étienne Gilson, renaissance, Christianity, humanism, Western civilization.