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THE OPTIMISM FROM A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF MAN:

ÉTIENNE GILSON AND CORNELIO FABRO

The notion of “Christian optimism” was used by Étienne Gilson (1884-1978) in his famous work *L’esprit de la philosophie médiévale*¹. The French philosopher referred to the first chapter of *Genesis*, in particular to these words: «*Viditque Deus cuncta quae fecerat, et erant valde bona*» (1,31). He meant that life is good and man is capable of being happy. Another philosopher, the Italian Cornelio Fabro (1911-1995), although he has never explicitly used the notion of “Christian optimism”, expressed the same idea². According to both philosophers, man (*every* man) is able to know (to reach the truth) and is free (able to choose for himself, and to choose to do good).

Well, today many forms of scepticism confront us and are becoming ever more pressing³. It seems that man *cannot know anything* and *cannot do anything good*. As a result,

¹ See Étienne GILSON, *Lo spirito della filosofia medioevale*, it. trans., 6th ed., Morcelliana, Brescia 1998, pp. 142-143.

² See Cornelio FABRO, *L’Anima. Introduzione al problema dell’uomo*, 2th ed., ed. by Christian Ferraro, Verbo Incarnato Publishers, Segni (Rome) 2005.

³ See Roberto DI CEGLIE (ed.), *Pluralismo contro relativismo. Filosofia, religione, politica*, Ares Publishers, Milan 2004 (Essays by Georges Cottier, Fulvio Di Blasi, Roberto Di Ceglie, Roberto Gallinaro, Pasquale Giustiniani, Antonio Livi, Michele Marsonet, Pier Paolo Ottonello, Dario Sacchi, Horst Seidl, Carmelo Vigna, Piero Viotto). See also Marcello PERA – Joseph RATZINGER, *Senza radici. Europa, relativismo, cristianesimo, islam*, 6th ed., Mondadori Publishers, Milan 2005.

people don't know what to do because of the incapability of distinguishing good from evil.

In order to seek solutions to these problems, it can be helpful to dwell upon the notion of "Christian optimism".

1. A Christian Philosophy

Both Gilson and Fabro did a "Christian philosophy": they constantly referred to the Christian revelation and its teachings. True, there are many ways of philosophizing in accord with the Christian revelation⁴. Étienne Gilson himself demonstrated that in the course of the history of philosophy there have been different Christian philosophies⁵. Moreover, it is well known that many modern and contemporary thinkers rejected the idea itself of a "Christian philosophy"⁶. Nevertheless, we are only interested in the optimism of Gilson and Fabro's philosophical anthropology. And it is not possible to dwell on it without making reference to the connection between philosophy and Christianity.

⁴ In fact, the expression "Christian philosophy" can receive different meanings. See Battista MONDIN, *Il sistema filosofico di Tommaso d'Aquino. Per una lettura attuale della filosofia tomista*, 2th ed., Massimo, Milan 1992, p. 11.

⁵ See Étienne GILSON, *Lo spirito della filosofia medioevale*. See also Battista MONDIN, *La storia della filosofia medioevale di É. Gilson*, in "Doctor communis", 38 (1985), p. 259. Recently the teaching of the Catholic Church expressed the same idea: see JOHN PAUL II, encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 9/14/1998, § 74, where the Pope referred to Čaadàev, Florenskij, Gilson, Vl. Lossky Maritain, Newman, Rosmini, Solov'ëv and Edith Stein. See also Roberto DI CEGLIE (ed.), *Verità della Rivelazione. I filosofi moderni della "Fides et ratio"*, Ares Publishers, Milan 2003.

⁶ About the famous French *querelle* of the 1930s see Antonio LIVI, *Il cristianesimo nella filosofia. Il problema della filosofia cristiana nei suoi sviluppi storici e nelle prospettive attuali*, Japadre Publishers, L'Aquila 1969.

Well, both Gilson and Fabro followed the very famous Thomistic tenet according to which «*gratia non destruit naturam sed perficit*». In other words: Christian revelation itself helps human reason to work *on its own*⁷; therefore, if Christian revelation poses questions for philosophers and suggests answers, the philosopher has to deal with them by using natural reason alone⁸.

It is known that Gilson was a protagonist of the famous French *querelle* on Christian philosophy⁹. According to him, «a single God, creator of heaven and earth, Ruler of the world and its Providence, a God Who made man in His own image and revealed to him, along with his last end, the way to attain it: where, in the splendid achievements of Greek philosophy, could one find a view of the world as clear and as perfectly satisfactory to the mind as the one revealed to man by Holy Scripture? Clearly, on all these problems, the teaching of revelation was incomparably more rational than the conclusions of reason»¹⁰. It is interesting that Gilson referred to the “rational” nature of the Bible: according to him – as I have already said – philosophy can accept suggestions from Christian revelation, but only *rational* suggestions, so that the philosopher can work *on its own*.

⁷ I dwelled on this topic in Roberto DI Ceglie, *Ragione e Incarnazione. Indagine filosofica sulla razionalità richiesta dal Vangelo*, Lateran University Press, Vatican City 2006.

⁸ This idea is well expressed in Étienne GILSON, *L'intelligence au service du Christ-Roi*, in *Christianisme et philosophie*, Vrin, Paris 1936, pp. 142-168.

⁹ See *La notion de philosophie chrétienne. Séance du 21 mars 1931*, in *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie*, 31 (1931). Gilson's perspective was shared by another important French philosopher, Jacques Maritain. See Jacques MARITAIN, *De la philosophie chrétienne*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1933.

¹⁰ Étienne GILSON, *What is Christian Philosophy?*, in Anton C. PEGIS (ed.), *A Gilson Reader. Selected Writings of Étienne Gilson*, Doubleday and C., Garden City, New York 1957, p. 178.

Unlike Gilson, Cornelio Fabro has not dwelt on the concept of “Christian philosophy” except for a very small book published only few years before his death: *Per un progetto di filosofia cristiana*¹¹. However, the Italian philosopher felt the same about the relationship between revelation and philosophy. According to him, «the first step of “Christian philosophy” is the persuasion that God exists, and that He is the first Principle and the last End»¹². By the same token, «the first task of “Christian philosophy” is to found the world on the creationist theism»¹³ and to point out the free relationship «between God and the world, between man and God and finally between man and the world»¹⁴.

2. Freedom and Person

I have just referred to the concept of freedom. In the course of the history of philosophy, it has not been always well understood. With regard to the Greeks, although they knew that man is free and responsible for his choices (they knew it as every man does), they were not able to develop a systematic theory of freedom¹⁵. The Greek culture gave great importance to the idea of fate: men and gods were forced to submit to it. On the contrary, thanks to the Bible, God, the unique God, is free and communicates His freedom to men. On this basis, Christian thinkers could develop the theory of free will¹⁶.

¹¹ Cornelio FABRO, *Per un progetto di filosofia cristiana*, D’Auria Publishers, Naples 1990.

¹² Cornelio FABRO, *Per un progetto di filosofia cristiana*, p. 13.

¹³ Cornelio FABRO, *Per un progetto di filosofia cristiana*, p. 20.

¹⁴ Cornelio FABRO, *Per un progetto di filosofia cristiana*, p. 33.

¹⁵ See Cornelio FABRO, *L’Anima*, pp. 97-98.

¹⁶ See Cornelio FABRO, *L’Anima*, p. 98.

As I had already said, Revelation helps philosophy by making suggestions, but philosophy has to develop them on its own. In fact, philosophy must start out of “common experience”, that is, those judgements that have the following characteristics: firstly they are true, secondly they are universal in that everybody knows them immediately without any kind of cognitive process. They cannot be demonstrated except *per absurdum* (the only form of demonstration in matter of principles)¹⁷. Well, everybody knows freedom as a certainty: the existence of the free will belongs to “common experience”¹⁸. However, only the Bible helped philosophy to dwell upon it, and to avoid incoherence and self-contradiction.

True, today freedom is considered a synonym of human dignity. The European culture¹⁹ would not be the same without it. In particular, we could not think of ourselves without the certitude that every man is free, equally free without distinction due to race, religion, social class, etc. But all these ideas were pointed out by Christian philosophy. In fact, no one before had introduced the notion of “person” and the certitude that *every* man is important, thanks only to his existence. Gilson stated that in the Bible the

¹⁷ From ancient times on, and particularly in modern and contemporary histories of philosophy, such judgements have been called “common sense”, “implicit philosophy”, “pre-philosophical judgements” etc. See Antonio LIVI, *Filosofia del senso comune. Logica della scienza e della fede*, Ares Publishers, Milan 1990; Roberto DI CEGLIE, *La filosofia del senso comune in Italia. Obiezioni e risposte*, Leonardo da Vinci Publishers, Rome 2005; Ralph MCINERNEY, *Implicit Moral Knowledge*, Rubbettino Publishers, Soveria Mannelli (Catanzaro) 2006.

¹⁸ It would not be possible not to know it: see the suggestive title of this book: Jay BUDZISZEWSKI, *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide*, Spence Publishing, Dallas 2003.

¹⁹ The term “European” is not only a geographic term. It refers to the culture that derives from Greek philosophy, Christian religion, Roman Law. See Roberto DI CEGLIE, *Persona e libertà: la filosofia davanti ai fondamenti cristiani della cultura europea*, in *ATTI DEL V SIMPOSIO EUROPEO DEI DOCENTI UNIVERSITARI*, Rome, September 28th – October 1th 2006, forthcoming.

Creator loves *each* creature and cares for him. From Revelation, even Aristotle who among pre-Christian philosophers had given the greatest importance to the individual, considered it less relevant than the universal²⁰.

As in the case of freedom, the notion of person derives from “common experience”, because everybody knows himself to be one, to be different from others and to be related to them, and knows it with certainty and immediately. At the same time, the concept of person was pointed out only thanks to Christian thought.

Both Gilson and Fabro stated the free and personal nature of man. This way, they underlined both the Christian roots of our culture and the high dignity of man: each of us is free and responsible for his choices. By the same token, this is a form of “christian optimism”. In fact, if human responsibility derives from the Creator, who must be good, freedom and responsibility should be used well by man. But can man be sure to use them well? Can he find the truth?

3. “Methodical realism” and the power of human reason

I have already mentioned the power of human reason when I referred to the “universal experience”, but let me now talk about this point in detail: in my opinion today this constitutes the core of “Christian optimism”²¹.

²⁰ Étienne GILSON, *Lo spirito della filosofia medioevale*, pp. 197 and 245. See also Battista MONDIN, “Persona”, in *Dizionario enciclopedico del pensiero di san Tommaso d’Aquino*, 2th ed., ESD, Bologna 2000.

²¹ Not by chance, the pope John Paul II published the encyclical *Fides et ratio* (1998) about the relationship between Christian faith and philosophy. See Antonio LIVI – Giuseppe LORIZIO (edd.), *Il desiderio di conoscere la verità. Teologia e filosofia a cinque anni da “Fides et ratio”*, with Preface by Rino FISICHELLA, Lateran University Press, Vatican City 2005.

It is clear that freedom cannot be used well without distinguishing (without knowing) good from evil. Well, it is known that today many different forms of scepticism state the radical incapability of mind to reach the truth. As many philosophers (not only Gilson and Fabro) have pointed out, this is a consequence of modern rationalism that wants to demonstrate every form of knowledge. According to some modern thinkers, knowledge can be reached only through demonstration. From the Cartesian “*cogito*” on, these philosophers opted for reducing philosophy to the mathematical method²². Instead, for some others this has only led to a further confirmation that this position lacks philosophical validity: not all knowledge can be reached through demonstration. In fact, philosophy should only unfold what people already know. It should not *discover* or *produce*, as is the case in the scientific and technological domain, but only *explicate*. To use a modern word, philosophy must show the *foundations* of knowledge. In other words, the foundations already exist because every knowledge presupposes them, and the goal of philosophy is to explicate them. In this sense, Aristotle was called “the philosopher of common sense *par excellence*”²³ and Aquinas, with regard to the “*cognitio experimentalis*”, said that only by willing we know our will, only by living we know that we live²⁴.

I have already referred to the “common experience”. It is the starting point of the philosopher, because before doing philosophy, the philosopher is a man. I have also stated more exactly that it cannot consist of an unspecified “common knowledge” but

²² See Carlos CARDONA, *Metafísica de la opción intelectual*, Ediciones Rialp, Madrid 1969.

²³ See Alasdair MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame, IN, 1988, p. 12.

²⁴ See THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 112, a. 5.

only of *what we can't not know*. Well, what we can't not know (call it “the first contents of knowledge”) has been called “common sense” (from Latin *sentire* = to judge, to think, to have an opinion). Particularly in the course of modern and contemporary histories of philosophy, many philosophers have dealt with them in many different countries and languages (“sensus communis”, “Gemeinsinn”, “senso comune”, “sentido comun”, “sens commun”, “common sense”). To recall only a few: Juan Luis Vives, Claude Buffier, Giambattista Vico, Thomas Reid, Friedrich Oetinger, Antonio Rosmini, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson and the contemporary thinkers Antonio Livi and Ralph McInerny. Although employing very different philosophical perspectives, they all have rejected every kind of rationalism and have stressed that philosophy is “wisdom”, that its beginning is in universal human experience, which should be simply acknowledged as it is. As Ralph McInerny said by means of a suggestive image, «when a mother asks, “How would you like it if someone did that to you?”, she expects and gets a recognition from her child. Is she teaching him the Golden Rule? Only in the sense that she teaches him English, presupposing the capacity to speak»²⁵.

Gilson understood the great importance of realism and common sense with regard to the modern development of philosophy. According to him, there is a total opposition between classical realism and modern subjectivism: the former recognizes the role of the common sense, the latter denies it and becomes idealism. This is why he opposed the tendency of other philosophers (Cardinal Mercier, Noël, Roland-Gosselin, Maréchal etc.) to conciliate realism and idealism; this is why he wanted to use the

²⁵ Ralph McINERNY, *Implicit Moral Knowledge*, p. 43.

expression “methodical realism” in order to state that realism is the only method of philosophy²⁶. In other words, at the beginning of knowledge there is not the doubt (the Cartesian “methodical doubt”) but the certainty about something, first of all about the *existence* of something (Gilson would say: “*res sunt*”): it would not be possible to doubt anything without reasons, that is, without certainties about something.

Unlike Gilson, Fabro has never used the notion of “common sense”. However, it must be said that he expressed the same idea. The Italian philosopher rejected any form of “critical realism”²⁷. He used the expression “phenomenology of perception” (it is also the title of one of his works) in order to grasp «that moment of the philosophical reflection when the concrete content of thought appears particularly stable and universal»²⁸. Fabro referred to the first contents of thought: «That each of us sees “the house, the tree, the sky...” is unquestionable, is not susceptible of any kind of “mediation”»²⁹. In sum, the thought presupposes the existence of its object. Not by chance, in Latin “to think” must be translated with “*pensare*”, that means “to weigh” and expresses reference to something else.

Both Gilson and Fabro exalted human reason. They stated its stability because every sort of “methodical doubt” presupposes a certainty. At the beginning of

²⁶ See ÉTIENNE GILSON, *Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance*, Vrin, Paris 1939. Gilson had already published *Le réalisme méthodique* in 1935 (Téqui, Paris, partially published in 1930). See also Cornelius R. FAY, *The Possibility of a Critical Realism: Noël vs. Gilson*, in *The New Scholasticism*, 31 (1957), pp. 172-188.

²⁷ Let me specify that neither did Jacques Maritain accepted the tendency to conciliate realism and idealism. Nevertheless, he used the expression “critical realism”. See Piero VIOTTO, *Jacques Maritain. Dizionario delle opere*, Città Nuova Publishers, Rome 2003, p. 117. On the debate between Maritain and Gilson, see Roberto DI Ceglie, *Étienne Gilson. Filosofia e Rivelazione*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli 2004, pp. 111-112.

²⁸ Cornelio FABRO, *L'Anima*, p. 17.

²⁹ Cornelio FABRO, *L'Anima*, p. 36.

knowledge there are certainties, there are true and immediate judgements. Only this way it is possible to know other things, because one reaches a true judgement only by starting from another true judgement (at the same time, one can recognize human reason's limits, because it starts from something else).

Man is capable of knowing and consequently he can do good: this is the “optimism” developed by Gilson and Fabro; this is a Christian philosophy of man that is up to date against any form of theoretical scepticism and moral relativism.