

INTERPRETATION

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BOOK REVIEW:

Christianity and Political Philosophy, by Frederick D. Wilhelmsen (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978) 243 pp.

JOSEPH J. CARPINO

I

The matter of *Christianity and Political Philosophy* lies in its detailed treatments of historical political philosophers from Cicero and Augustine through Fortesque and Harry V. Jaffa (to mention just a few), but its form lies in the author's contention

that Christianity opened up to philosophical speculation an entirely new range of questions that issued into answers that today are part and parcel of the intellectual tradition of the West. (p. 9)

"The genius of the West," Professor Wilhelmsen notes, is constantly to question its own presuppositions, "but in questioning them [it] renews them" (p. 4). And among modern and contemporary presuppositions are such things as "personal dignity, . . . the pretensions of a universal liberty for all men," and the absolute rejection of slavery (p. 212). Such things, he maintains, are attributable historically and in principle to the influence of Christian beliefs on Western thought.

Practically all metaphysical questions concerning [human] existence are Christian questions whether they be answered with the optimism of an Aquinas or the despair of a Sartre. Greeks never thought about such things. (pp. 16-17)

Wilhelmsen, of course, opts for the vision of St. Thomas, but he carries his concern into our own time by proposing, at the end of his opening essay (on "The Limits of Natural Law"), the search for a new martyr for Western thought:

A return to Socrates is simply not possible to anybody who takes history seriously—and that history, altogether without apologies, has been Christian history. . . . A hero to natural decency for our time will incarnate the dependence of politics upon natural law and natural law upon revelation. (pp. 22-23)

Wilhelmsen's candidate is Count Klaus von Stauffenberg, a good Christian and "a 'natural law' man," and his description of von Stauffen-

berg's lonely decision concludes with lines which embody the author's central contention:

From the living flesh of Christian history, political philosophy will justify its existence tomorrow or it will have no existence whatsoever. (p. 24)

The "corpus" of the book, its main substance, consists in four chapters, each of which "addresses itself to a philosophical problem generated by history" in terms of "its conception by some man of wisdom who passionately wanted to know where he stood within his own world" (p. 7).

The first of these (Chapter 2, with the late Willmoore Kendall) is devoted to "Cicero and the Politics of the Public Orthodoxy." By "public orthodoxy" is meant

that tissue of judgments, defining the good life and indicating the meaning of human existence, which is held commonly by the members of any given society, who see in it the charter of their way of life and the ultimate justification of their society. (p. 26)

In short, "public orthodoxy" embodies the myths and traditions, many of them simply religious, which are assumed by any given society, usually uncritically and often quite unconsciously, the presuppositions which ground everything else in the society, especially its laws. One of the assumptions of Roman public orthodoxy is that the gods of Rome exist and that they care about Rome and Roman laws (p. 41). Cicero takes note, in the *De legibus*, of the civic and political utility of belief in gods devoted to a city devoted to them (pp. 44–45). A problem emerges, however, in the *De natura deorum*: philosophical inquiry could easily lead to an atheism (or, what is the same thing in effect, to an uncaring and universal Nature as the ground), which would undermine Roman public orthodoxy, and with it law itself (pp. 51–53). Cicero's solution is the classical one: "these matters ought not to be discussed in public, lest much discussion destroy the established religion of the nation" (quoted on p. 53), a kind of secular Averroism, "an attitude that can be maintained only by a few, and by them not for long" (p. 57).

The only adequate resolution, the chapter concludes, to this abiding dilemma of pagan political philosophy, is the one offered by Christian "public orthodoxy," an orthodoxy "guaranteed by transcendence" (p. 59), the revelation, in short, that the ground of being and meaning is itself personal and personally concerned with justice among all men. With this, "the truths of the soul and of society, the first principles of the politeia and of metaphysics (that is, the very being of both), are theoretically guaranteed"

(p. 59). Without it, the political philosopher must choose between the schizoid cynicism of Cicero (cf. p. 57), and destruction, by a society simply defending itself against philosophy—i.e., Socrates (p. 59).

The third chapter, and the longest in the book, is strikingly entitled “The Problem of Political Power and the Forces of Darkness.” It deals with what seems to be the inevitable entropy of human institutions: “search as long as we will, we can find no political order which has lasted perpetually” (p. 65).

The problem for the political philosopher . . . can be defined as follows: there simply must be some third factor that interposes itself between the laws of being and an honorable society, . . . something irrational in the marrow of existence which breaks the heart of decent men and brings to nought the heroism of the best of regimes. (p. 65)

For ancient thought this was not really a theoretical problem. “To the classical mind, evil was intelligible. We need only recall Plato’s brilliant tracing of the progressive degradation from philosopher-king to tyrant in the *Republic*” (p. 72). For Aristotle the fortuitous is really “sent—by nothing at all. The absurd is this very nothing” (p. 73), and therefore is not a problem for philosophy.

In practice, however, self-conscious regimes (and Rome is the case in point) tried to forestall the inevitable by some more or less technical device (Polybius on the “mixed constitution” [pp. 76–77]), or in terms of the “community of city and gods” under “its own first soldier, the emperor” (p. 77). But even Rome’s success was a kind of holding action, against time and the barbarian hordes (pp. 79–80).

With Constantine, “the first Christian emperor, . . . the first theologian of the politics of transcendence” (p. 82), comes the hope of an abiding city.

Constantine, a good politician, thought that Christ was the answer to the mystery of contingency because Christ would guarantee to His imperial servant the preservation of Roman civilization. (p. 82)

Constantine’s presumptions were soon (or at least eventually) laid low, and in his examination of Eusebius’s theological propaganda Wilhelmssen puts the matter quite plainly:

If the projects of the first Christian Augustus [i.e., Constantine] are identified with the will of God and the faithful compliance to His laws, then politics are converted into religion and religion into politics—and both of them into technology, into an efficient instrument for achieving planned effects. (p. 86)

Another Constantinian apologist, Lactantius, is discussed at some length (pp. 89–95), but he too, with “his insistence that ‘the love and piety of Christ’ will resolve automatically the problem of political power” (p. 93), “did not settle the problem of chance or unintelligibility in politics” (p. 95). That was left to Augustine of Hippo.

Though by no means a “latitudinarian” in these matters, “it is also evident that Augustine did not advance Christianity as a solution for any concrete political problem” (p. 98). Christianity “can act politically [only] as a kind of final meaning within historical existence” (p. 98). What Christianity does provide is “a motive for being prudent, generous, chaste, honorable, and just,” a kind of motivation not accessible to philosophy alone (p. 100).

According to Augustine virtue become a concrete historical possibility when the call to virtue is converted into something personal and not [merely] civic, when I desire my own perfection because God desires it and I love God. (p. 100)

And later, with Aquinas, the other problem of political life—“the unintelligibility of the fortuitous”—is solved by an appeal to a Cause transcending the finite order:

Fortune, unintelligible within the context of this world, is known to be intelligible when situated in a context in which the entire order of finite causation depends on an intelligence and will which form no part of this order but which makes the order exist. (p. 101)

“In a word,” Professor Wilhelmsen concludes, “I know that chance is intelligible but I do not know the intelligibility.” (p. 101) One might prefer a more precise “I *believe* that chance is intelligible . . . ,” but in any case a resolution (of sorts) to “The Problem of Political Power and the Forces of Darkness” emerges, and the rest of the chapter is devoted to it.

Total pictures and a concern for the survival of the species (a concern which in our time can at last be articulated)—such things *must*, because they *can*, with confidence, be left to God. But as each individual must act according to his individual duties, so too must each group and each nation and even “our beloved civilization” act according to its own proper resolve. Referring apparently to the dangers of Communism, Professor Wilhelmsen ends the chapter with an exhortation:

Our fathers wrought the city out of the catalyst of time. They fenced this city all around and they set up sentinels and to each they gave a sword. They ordered us to defend the city, and it were better for the whole cosmos to go up in flames, unto the very last star and the most remote moon, burnt out—

the whole of existence scorched and reduced to a cinder blown away into the awful wastes of the void—than that dishonor should unfold the banner of Hell within our walls. (pp. 109-10)

Chapters 4 (“Sir John Fortesque and the English Tradition”) and 5 (“Donoso Cortés and the Meaning of Political Power”) are of considerable historical interest and provide examples of the author’s concern for the metaphysical and theological bases of political reflection.

Sir John Fortesque, a fifteenth-century constitutionalist and briefly Lord Chancellor (p. 113), offers advice to his prince and praise of the laws of England which, if not dependent on, are at least in accord with the political thought of St. Thomas. An English king should never feel his power diminished because it is “restrained by political law” (p. 125).

The exercise of royal power could be specified by laws made by the people as in England or it could be specified—as Fortesque indicates—by more capricious formalities such as the greed and passions of the ruler; but specified power will always be. (p. 126)

Not to be able to fall easily into tyranny is an advantage and not a limitation to the power exercised by a king. (p. 133)

“A moralist, in the modern sense of the term,” Wilhelmsen suggests, would merely *agree* that the power of a king hemmed in by law *is* less than that of an absolute monarch, and would add, “So what!” But what has to be seen in Fortesque’s doctrine (and, he adds, in Aquinas on the role of the people [p. 135]) is the practical conjunction of theory and self-interest.

The entire trick consists in thinking oneself back into a Christian world in which the ability to work harm on others and to follow the wisp of one’s own desire are not understood to be marks of power but are looked upon as wounds in human nature and hence in human power itself. (p. 134)

The treatment of Donoso Cortés (Chapter 5) is of necessity somewhat more “metaphysical” than that of Fortesque, and it focuses on two points: the relationship between (political) power and authority (which usually means “authorization”), and what is called “Donoso’s law of variety and unity (pp. 160 *et passim*), a “law” apparently derived ultimately from the relationships within the Trinity Itself (cf. the paragraph from Donoso quoted on p. 158).

Beginning with a rejection of the Machiavellian principle that “successful power . . . justifies itself,”—this, he says, is but a resurrection of “the ancient classical conviction that power equals virtue” (p. 140)—Professor Wilhelmsen remarks that “the focal problem of power in a Chris-

tian context ceases to be the glory of the prince or the presumed eternity of the polity” (p. 140).

We Christians suspect power because we believe that whatever authority guides power is always derived from on high. No power, be it political or otherwise, justifies itself. (p. 140)

Political power in the Roman Republic was always subject to the *responsa* of the juriconsults, the answers “given to the questions put to wise men by the community.” “Thus it was that Roman law clearly distinguished between the concepts of authority and power” (p. 142). In the Middle Ages the distinction was, if anything, extended, sunk into the fabric of society:

Authority in medieval Christendom was broadened beyond the authority proper to the judges until it was diffused throughout a whole host of institutions that marked the medieval world and made it the unique political thing that it was. Authority was as pluralistic as life itself. (pp. 144-145)

The modern absolute state appears with Bodin’s “use of the symbol of [the Aristotelian] substantial form to define the role of the state” (p. 150), the countervailing societal authorities having disappeared and the community homogenized into “an amorphous dough” subject to a sovereign power “which absorbed all authority into itself” (p. 151).

European liberalism’s preferred form of government was a highly centralized parliamentary democracy based on the party system and tempered by an allegiance to commercial and industrial interests. (p. 152).

Montesquieu’s quasi-technical solution (“more descriptive . . . than prescriptive” [p. 155]), that liberty will be assured by the “separation of powers,” became a “settled conviction” for “the liberalism of the times” (p. 155).

At this point (in the 1850’s) Donoso Cortés appears, the “most eloquent and profound spokesman” of “European traditionalism” (p. 152). Basing his objections on a “law of variety and unity,” which he proposes to have found in the Trinity and in creation (p. 158), and in being in general (p. 159), Donoso rejects *both* absolute monarchy (pp. 161–62)—though it at least recognizes the necessary unity of power as such—and the chaotic fragmentation of power in liberalist parliamentarianism (pp. 162–63).

The burden of the argument . . . is Donoso’s demonstration that political sanity

involves an essential unity of power on the one hand and the essential variety of hierarchies on the other. (p. 160)

“The apparent division of power in the English constitution”—a living model for liberals, following Montesquieu (p. 166)—“was simply a division of labor in the business of government.” (p. 168). The power of the British aristocracy was “unlimited from within its own structure”; it was limited “from without by the common law, by custom, . . . and by a thicket of traditional rights and duties which were inherited by the American colonies and thus incorporated into the American tradition” (p. 169). The author quotes Donoso:

“by suppressing the hierarchies which are the natural and hence divine form of *variety* and hence denying to Power its indivisibility which is the divine, natural, and necessary condition of its unity, [parliaments] produced an open insurrection against God. ” (p. 171)

Contemporary politics have left the West “without an effective representative of the authority of God and of the moral law” (p. 172); but “Politics which sin against the laws of being do so at their own peril” (p. 172), either losing themselves “in the insane pretensions of a tyrannical egotism (isolationist America today)” or giving themselves over “to gnostic or totalitarian dreams . . . (Russia and China)” (p. 173).

The last three chapters of the book are a bit more polemic, “replies” as it were, to objections. Chapter 6, “The Natural Law Tradition and the American Political Experience,” again takes up the author’s concern for the role of natural law within political life. He distinguishes between “ideological” and “procedural” democracy (pp. 177, 188, *et passim*). Ideological democracy submits everything to “a law superior to the natural law, the law of the will of 50 percent plus one” (p. 177). The abiding tradition of the West, however, from Cicero on down, contained

the growing conviction . . . that there was a trans-positive law which bound all men . . . and that concrete political societies must bind their own legal codes around this law, one that comes forth from God but that is known by reason. (p. 179)

But Ciceronian natural law “was a law without teeth” (p. 180). With Augustine and Aquinas the abstract ideals of pagan natural law are given a motive and an authority.

Love, in the Augustinian vision of existence, is the gasoline that puts into

motion the machinery of classical natural law. . . The natural law, be it as natural and open to discovery by reason as it might be, nonetheless demands an interpreter, and this interpreter must be an authority concerning the content of the law itself. (p. 180)

“In the Catholic tradition the interpreter was the voice of Peter” (p. 180), and “in most Protestant confessions” the interpreter survived as “the inheritance itself of Christian morality, speaking through its wisest representatives and incarnating itself in living political and social institutions” (p. 181). An example is the executive’s power to pardon.

This suspending right of the crown [e.g., the power to pardon] was based in theory on the conviction that there was a law superior to positive law and that the king of England, in some remote metaphysical and theological sense, was the representative of that law. In a word, the crown was the repository of the authority of the natural law in English constitutional theory, a last recourse for justice . . . until the late seventeenth century. (p. 183)

The natural law tradition is not absent, in America, but it is confused and ambiguous. “The United States was not born. The United States was made; it was a work of art. . . . We are a nation because a number of men wrote us down on foolscap” (pp. 184–85). But the natural law tradition,

both classical and Christian, was based on certain metaphysical presuppositions: man has a nature . . . [which] enjoys a certain stability the center of which is intrinsically good and not corrupted by sin. . . . (p. 186)

Evolutionism (or historicism) and Calvinism, between them, undercut the tradition, and “a deistic and free-thinking eighteenth-century rationalism” (p. 187) finished the job. And as a result of a careful and conscious implementation of the separation of powers, the Constitution provided for “no ultimate authority in the whole Federal system capable of defending the natural law” (p. 187).

Today, “the system itself is in danger,” and if public opinion, “manipulated as it is by the mass media . . . is opposed to the natural law tradition on this or that issue . . . then the tradition will die in this land” (p. 188). But there’s no helping it: “The spirit of the age is against natural law teaching” (p. 188). And the result is “a new barbarism bent on self-indulgence and passion” (p. 190).

That a million children can be aborted in New York in one year with hardly a ripple of protest and that the Watergate bugging case, a moral triviality, can produce a storm of protest around the nation indicates that our moral priorities are somehow perverse. (p. 190)

“The natural law in our land, as in England, floats in the air, a kind of vaguely remembered inheritance” (p. 191), but if it continues to be violated, as it is being violated, the practice “will destroy the race itself” (p. 192).

When he deals with “Professor Voegelin and the Christian Tradition” (Chapter 7), Wilhelmssen is respectful but firm in his criticism. The object of his concern is Voegelin’s “long-awaited” fourth volume of *Order and History, The Ecumenic Age*, a work which Voegelin-watchers anticipated would “culminate [the series] with an apotheosis given over to Christianity and history. . . . Nothing of the kind happened” (p. 196).

We have all learned from this man and our gratitude to him must far outweigh any second thoughts on the deeper import of his work. But second thoughts I have and intellectual candor demands that they be expressed. (p. 197)

The problem seems to be that Voegelin “represents our common Western religion through the prism of the experience of Saint Paul and almost exclusively through that prism” (p. 197).

Nowhere in Voegelin’s thought does the Church play any significant role whatsoever in this act of constituting man’s life in history under God. (p. 198)

Voegelin concentrates solely on the *experience* of the divine (in Parmenides, Heraclitus, St. Paul), abstracting completely from its “historic verification” (p. 203)—that is, from its existential validity, its “truth”—and he totally disregards the objective historical purport of “the creeds, the historic creeds” (p. 205). Mystical experiences are important and certainly interesting, but what changed the West was the institutional and doctrinal embodiments of Christian faith, in the Church and in the creeds.

Without an understanding of these creeds, especially in their political implications, the West is simply unintelligible as a potential subject for philosophical penetration. (p. 206)

Wilhelmssen does not ask Voegelin to *believe* any of the creeds, but he did expect him at least to *deal* with them and with their development. “History is not mystical experience” (p. 207).

With “Jaffa, the School of Strauss, and the Christian Tradition” (Chapter 8), we are treated to a kind of climactic final thrust. Strauss and Voegelin are important for our author insofar as between them they virtually exhaust “the philosophical–political spectrum dominating American

conservative thought today” (p. 194).

The friends of political wisdom and sanity can only doff their hats in gratitude at the careful demolition of philosophical positivism undertaken at the hands of the school of Leo Strauss. (p. 209)

Then, having paid his respects in all sincerity—our common debt to Leo Strauss requires nothing less—Professor Wilhelmsen very quickly gets down to cases . . . again, in all respect.

It may be accidental that most Straussians are Hellenized Jews, but it is by no means accidental that a Hellenized Jew must find the Christian mind and sensibility something foreign and distant to his mind and heart. (p. 210)

A Hellenized Jew “retains his Jewish awe before the might and majesty of the God of Israel but . . . his mind has been fashioned in the wisdom of pagan Greece and a gulf separates the two dimensions of his being: his heart is Jewish but his head is Athenian.” (pp. 210–11.) The paradigm, of course, is Averroes, neither Jew nor Hellene. According to Averroes,

[faith] moves us in a mysterious world which is irrational, but moved we are by this faith. Reason guides us away from this call to faith. Given that we are men of both reason and faith, we are torn to pieces by two conflicting authorities. . . . Such men walk as did Cicero, internally denying the gods but professing them publicly. . . . An esoteric and exoteric contradiction dominates their thinking. (p. 211)

The occasion of our author’s analysis is Harry V. Jaffa’s presentation (in *The Conditions of Freedom*) of Strauss’s understanding of the antithetical relationship between reason and revelation.

Jaffa insists that Strauss maintained that revelation at its highest, God’s to Israel, stands in a kind of polarized opposition to philosophical reason as enshrined in the wisdom of Greece. The reader will note that [for Jaffa] Jewish revelation is revelation at its highest . . . and that Greek philosophy is reason at its highest. . . . [Underneath] there lurks an undemonstrable premise . . . : reason is only reason at its best when unaided by revelation, and revelation is only revelation at its purest when unmixed with reason. (pp. 216-17)

This takes no account, says Wilhelmsen, of “Theology, in Christian terms,” which is “neither philosophy nor faith but a body of doctrine produced by men reasoning about the content of God’s revelation” (p. 217). Jaffa, he suggests, “prefers that revelations not be thought about” (p. 217), and his argument (Jaffa’s) is philosophical, “drawn from the structure of synthesis” as such:

“Nor did he [Strauss] believe in the possibility of a synthesis [between faith and reason], since any synthesis would require a higher principle than either, a principle which regulated the combination.” (Jaffa, quoted on p. 217)

The point is well taken, says Wilhelmsen, and it is an old one for Strauss-watchers. “No synthesizing principle can form part of any synthesis” (p. 217), and any principle “regulating” the synthesizing of faith and reason “would have to transcend both” (p. 218). But the polarity is misplaced, the antithesis mistaken.

To believe is to assent intellectually, moved by a will primed by the grace of God, in propositions, to the truth of what is believed. . . . Apes cannot receive the gift of faith because they cannot think . . . [but] a man can assent reasonably to testimony. (. . . Mongolian idiots can be baptized but they can never exercise in propositions the content of the faith they have.) (pp. 218-19)

Reason, in short, precedes, accompanies, and follows upon “the gift of faith.” It is what makes us human and it is entailed in everything we do as human beings. But “Jaffa and his fellow Straussians at large use the term *reason* as a kind of shorthand for philosophy” (p. 219).

Philosophical reasoning, however, is only one kind and exercise of a rationality that extends to every facet of human existence. . . . The valid polarity [therefore] does not run from revelation to reason; it runs from revelation to philosophy. And the synthesizing principle, reducible to neither—thus fulfilling Professor Jaffa’s requirement for a genuine synthesis—is reason itself as an act. (pp. 219-20)

The distinction is not without merit. But the teaching, says Wilhelmsen, “is Aquinas’s” (p. 220).

Jaffa . . . has forgotten about reasoning as an *act*. Theological content as well as philosophical content are concluded to by the mind reasoning. Theology is a synthesis of faith and philosophy. (p. 221)

And—although our author does not allude to it—the work of the Rabbis through the centuries has been eminently rational; they could hardly be said to have appropriated their faith or kept the Law mutely and without propositional articulation. But the issue, Wilhelmsen suggests, is “only peripherally concerned with philosophy.”

We are talking about something far deeper, about where a man feels at home. To mask an uncomfortableness in Christian culture under the guise of a presumed superiority of Greek pagan thought to Christian thought is principled

ignorance because nowhere do the Straussians demonstrate their assertion point for point. (p. 222)

In short, "A prejudice prevents the school of Leo Strauss from seriously giving its attention to the claims of Christian philosophy" (p. 223), and that prejudice is "the old presumption that philosophy must have no presuppositions lest it spoil its pristine purity" (p. 224). But that is essentially "an historicist prejudice," that because philosophy "began in classical Greece, philosophy must remain there" (p. 224).

As indicated earlier in this book, all philosophical questioning grows out of some prephilosophical horizon within which a man simply finds himself as given in a world. But . . . *Christians and Jews . . . know that all reality is a kind of suspended earthquake . . .* [and] . . . *that existence is a gift.* (p. 223; emphasis added)

Except for the word "know" (again, "believe" or even "imagine" would be more precise), the italicized sentence might provide a kind of conciliatory image, a metaphysical context *common* to Jews and Christians and *inaccessible* to the Greeks. But Professor Wilhelmsen does not "pick up" on it; instead he concludes the chapter with a qualified rejection of Jaffa's "conviction" that "in the final analysis, not only American politics, but all modern politics, must be clarified on the basis of classical political philosophy" (Jaffa, quoted on p. 224).

But we must ask the professor [Jaffa] why only classical pagan Greeks are useful to us in our attempt to understand a political history [i.e., American] that grew out of the English common law, a tradition so thoroughly medieval and Germanic and Christian that there is nothing at all in distant Athens even remotely related to it? (p. 224)

And finally, to nail it down:

Any principled refusal to read and assess the meaning of America that ignores Christianity is at the very best a game of ideological partisanship; at the worst, this game dooms political theory to antiquarianism. (p. 225.)

Christianity and Political Philosophy is not a book to be scanned lightly. It is provocative and informed, and despite its appearance of being merely a collection of essays, historical and polemical, it has a structure and a message, and a unifying theme: "Christian philosophy . . . is not a theory; Christian philosophy is an historical reality" (p. 223), and we ignore it at our peril.

II

The problem of "Christianity and Political Philosophy" resides in the words themselves. "Christian Political Philosophy" would at least take a stand, purporting to define a domain of inquiry (with perhaps some slight ambiguity as to which is the *differentia*). But the "and" implies caution, as though the two merely walked alongside each other, touching and commenting on common concerns from time to time, but remaining always not the same. And of course they are not the same, they have not dissolved together, because there is still the more fundamental problem of the conjunction of "Christianity and Philosophy," and beneath that the deeper question of the very possibility of "Christian Philosophy" as such. Do the words *go* together?

It's no good merely pointing to the "fact" of historical Christian philosophies, "kicking the log" as it were, presuming to prove the possibility from the actuality, since what is at issue is the nature and not the mere claim to existence of the entities denominated. *Ab esse ad posse valet illatio* (p. 223 of Wilhelmsen) makes sense only where the *esse* in question has some intelligible "substance" to it, and it is of *no* help where the possibility of self-contradiction is involved. Astrology, for example, is real, incredibly real in our own time, but it is quite impossible, and Cicero knew it in his time. The same might be the case for "Christian Philosophy" (or "Jewish," or "Islamic," for that matter); it might all be an illusion, a chimera, the pasting together of things that don't *go* together.

The problem is not the same for Christian theology (or Jewish, or Islamic). A rational articulation of the content of faith is *not* a contradiction in terms, and only an inhuman cruelty would deny it to the believer or to a community of belief. Departing from a more or less compact "deposit of faith," it may issue in a creed or it may not, but the *impulse* to flesh out with words (or, to fence in, with more words) the givens of belief is integral to a properly human appropriation of revelation.

But that's not philosophy. Philosophy, to put it most broadly, is a thoughtful consideration of being, of the Being and beings accessible to anyone capable of thinking about them. Unlike the content of a supernatural faith, which must remain, if not simply private to the believer at least theoretically hidden from the unbeliever, the "objects" of philosophical inquiry must in a sense be public, visible to all who can speak. Even when the contents of faith are manifested in creeds or in institutions—and thus to some extent made "public"—examination of these creeds and institutions is not philosophy but a form of historical investigation, and an endeavor by no means confined to believers.

On the face of it, then, if a Christian is to philosophize, he must do

so in terms of essentially the same “being” as was accessible to ancient pagan experience. All else—again, on the face of it—is theology or history, where it does not descend to mere edification. And the basic possibilities, so far as fundamentally distinguishable philosophical visions of being are concerned, were pretty well exhausted, in classical thought, by the time of Cicero. The list is not long: Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Scepticism, and, to round it off, Cicero’s own Eclecticism. There may have been a few others, lesser permutations, but these are about *it*. (Plotinus comes later, to be sure, but he offers little that is radically new and is certainly no Christian philosopher.) And *any* attempt to philosophize, Christian *or* otherwise, *since then*, must inevitably turn to one of them if it is to be perfectly consistent with the “ontic” presupposition, the “hypothesis,” of an experience of being totally devoid of any Jewish or Christian cosmological “input” (to make use of a vulgarism). All else is hybridization, and illegitimate—or so at least it would appear.

What we get in the Middle Ages and for a while afterwards, *apart* from frankly theological efforts, are largely “baptized” pagan philosophies of one sort or another, philosophizing “informed by Christian concerns,” directed at Christian objects, “in the context of medieval Christendom,” and the like. What is there, for example, in Aquinas’s *De ente et essentia* that is specifically Christian, aside from his general mien and some of the entities to which he addresses himself? (True, the Forms are so foreign to his thought that he must particularize and even personalize them, as Angels, Thrones, and Dominations; but that *lacuna* is *not* what is usually regarded as specifying the Christian-ness of his philosophy.) And besides, there is always the spectre of Averroism haunting the age, a living option theoretically, however dangerous it may have been practically, for medieval thinkers.

No, the bishops were correct, in their instinctive condemnation of Aristotle when he first appeared in Paris in the thirteenth century. The *point* of the spear is the *essence* of the spear; all the rest is just baggage and sweet-talk. Aristotle *was* dangerous.

But penetration was achieved, and as the intruding body was encapsulated and neutralized, the ichor began quietly to flow. The scholastics, it must be remembered, were teachers, and teachers have to have something to talk about. Besides, as Aquinas pointed out, All truth comes from the Holy Ghost, so what’s to fear? And so the little pagan child was nurtured and fed and christianized. A diapered and tractable baby ape (to modify the image a bit) is much less trouble around the house than a naked squalling human infant; so even if he’s not exactly ours, they must have felt, let’s keep him!

So much for medieval Christian philosophy, essentially a “nova” of paganism fed on the ambient energies of Christian concerns; and as grand

as it was, it soon collapsed into the hardened opacities of memorizable theses.

The problem is that if there were to be such a thing as Christian philosophy it would have to be a “thoughtful consideration” of some “new” kind of being, a somehow public reality which was not *there* or at least not *accessible* to what may be called, by way of shorthand, “Greek consciousness.” As a matter of fact, in addition to the “content,” its style and “method” might even have to be different from the classical philosophical mode, perhaps even more “indirect”—if that can be conceived—than the procedures required of Socrates’s returned prisoner; for after all, what is at issue here, what would *have* to be at issue, is a “new being,” here *in the Cave* for all to see, and not the mere bespeaking of an old ineffable One outside the Cave. Mystical vision may have been the engine driving the philosophical enterprise from the start, but mystical vision is not especially Christian, however rare the genuine article may be.

To repeat then. What would be needed, if Christian Philosophy were to exist *and* be different from pagan philosophy more than merely cosmetically is —*per impossibile*—a new being, a new kind or dimension of reality somehow connected with and grounded in the Event that Christians consider a novelty; and, to deal with it, *perhaps* (because this is the human and formal part, and it might remain the same) a new *way* of philosophizing. (The distinction implied here, between matter and form, is itself in function of the old method, but if Kant can let it slip past him we need not quibble now.) What is at issue is not the creeds and institutions—theology and history will deal with them—or the opinions and posturings of people who claim to be in possession of a supernatural faith—psychopathology might handle that. A new presence, a different “wavelength” (to borrow a contemporary metaphor), a “frequency” unheard of and invisible to classical thinkers would have to appear, because, it must be said, if it had been there, they would have seen it. But the idea of a radically new being is quite inconceivable; new things, perhaps, and even some surprises, but not “new being.”

The real paradox is that if there were to be such a “new being,” or new dimension pervading the old, philosophical examination of it might best be done by non-Christians, people who think of themselves, whether secretly or openly, as unbelievers, or at most as only on the periphery of belief. Christians, as “members” of this new being (again, we speak in imagery), even when they are not being seduced by the urgencies of apologetics or the sweets of edification, might not have the “distance” necessary for objective and impartial theorizing. And what these neutral observers might first notice is a lack of phase, unpredicted perturbations, so to speak,

absences which shouldn't be *there*. Or they might not notice them; after all, they can only work from the tables that they have. But *we* cannot miss them, the discrepancies, indeed the *errors*, in terms of the old charts.

Old self-evidences will have quietly disappeared, though not all of them, and new tacit assumptions will emerge—still tacit, of course. The Forms will probably be the first casualty. As necessary as they or something like them were for classical philosophy (except for Epicureanism, for which all discourse was rhetorical, gentle in private and careful in public), the Forms are simply *gone* in modern thought. (Mathematics remains, of course, but the old horror of the *apeiron* is replaced by a fascination with “infinity.”) Along with the Forms will disappear their necessary correlative, the unintelligible substratum, the meaningless manifold, and the assumption may arise—incredible as it may seem, and so inconsistent with the most ordinary experience—that being and intelligibility are co-extensive (to use an old terminology), or, that everything is supposed to make sense.

These are the sorts of things that might mark the emergence of something new and perhaps Christian in philosophy, irrationalities and apparent forgetfulnesses in cosmology and epistemology (“but we’ve already been *through* that,” the ancients might say.), but absolute madness in moral and political philosophy (“You can’t be serious!”). The sacredness of the individual, the possibility of achieving virtue—of being human!—apart from the political context, a familial rather than a merely specific view of mankind, and (to bring us back to Cicero) the *immorality* of pride in one’s own excellences—in short, and except for this last, the whole sticky catalogue of contemporary liberal vanities. (And even this last is aped, today, in the political importance of “sincerity.”)

A case could be made, in other words, for regarding the whole *sequence* of modern philosophy, the whole as-yet-unfinished *chain* of modern and contemporary thinkers (not merely the philosophers and certainly no one of them) as the historical embodiment of what “Christian Philosophy” would have to be like, or begin as. There is even a “procedural” novelty in modern thought, a new “way” of thinking, which almost *specifies* modern philosophy in its middle years, and that is the search for system, for *the* system by which to grasp and articulate the Whole; no Greek would ever have attempted such a thing. That impulse, however, seems to have exhausted itself—unless it has merely gone underground, or worse, has been *aufgehoben* in technological consciousness.

The changeover, the attendance to this “new being” (or to illusions which paraded as novelty) probably began as early as St. Augustine, and there were doubtless prefigurative *lacunae* all through the Middle Ages, but the reductions to absurdity offered by contemporary relativisms and American liberalism must not blind us to the inherent “intentionalities” of

that tradition, as mixed as it has been in fact. (Leo Strauss was not blinded. He knew, with Gamaliel, that if this thing be not from God, "it will come to nought.") And this applies especially to Christians, who often tend to regard the metaphysical asides of St. Thomas or the philosophical crumbs from the table of *any* believing thinker as philosophical gospel. Shot through as it is with atheism, anticlericalism, "humanism," and naturalism, modern Western thought alienates the Christian (and Jew) of tender sensibilities (and even the not-so-tender), but the complete returns are not yet in.

Voluntarism, for example, the grounding of meaning in the will, is not so insane in the light of a Measure Who, *quoad nos*, functions principally as a Creator *ex nihilo* and not as a craftsman imposing pre-given structures on a matter which also pre-dates his activity. Humanism, the primacy of Man and even of individual human beings, is not so easily shrugged off as Protagoreanism was, when the "man" in question, each one of us in fact, is *imago dei* and personally related (though at some remove, in most cases) to the incarnate Word, the intelligibility of God. (Only Christians believe God is Jewish.) And even materialism, that delightful pit of ancient thought, will have a different context, a new basis and a better lineage, when the smallest atom, the very mud and sand of Plato's Parmenides, is held in being, energized, by the warmth of God's fingertips. There is considerable farce in the drama of modern thought, but there are also some good lines, and the curtain has not yet come down.

The question of the possibility of a Christian Philosophy is most crucial in the area of "metaphysics," where the meaning of being (or, the being of meaning) is all that is involved. But it is also at its most technical there, and as those very technicalities tend to keep it *hors de combat* in most discussions, it can be set aside for the present. The situation is not the same in moral and political philosophy, however.

There *do seem to be* moral positions and even political ideals which are specifically Christian and which can be grasped without the aid of Christian-philosophical or any other ontological or epistemological apparatus. But on closer examination and in the light of even the most superficial acquaintance with classical moral philosophy there are *very few* "moral values" which are specifically Christian. Setting aside such *vagueries* as "reverence for life," which conservatives today apply to unborn fetuses and which liberals accord to condemned murderers (while some vegetarians extend it to all animals and the Crusaders apparently limited it mainly to themselves), and not even *mentioning* what are called "the theological virtues," there is only one significant "transvaluation" that comes with and is essential to Christianity (and Judaism), and that concerns the nature

and status of pride. Arrogance, boastfulness, and even most pitiful vanity, were all condemned in the ancient world, to be sure, but largely because they were "too much" or disorderly. A certain amount of greatness of soul was permissible, even required in some cases. But in the Gospels even the understandable self-congratulation of the pharisee is prohibited, as might be expected if we are only the *stewards* of our own being, never the owners. David is taken from among the flocks, the widow's mite is preferred; throughout, the small is made great and the proud are humbled.

But what can you do with that politically?! As hard as humility is to live in a private condition, it is impossible and even "inoperative" in public life. And all the rest, justice, temperance (and with it, chastity), courage, patriotism, honesty, industriousness—to mention but a random few—are *human* virtues, natural and even "pagan," if it comes to that. At best they are the "military virtues" *presupposed* by Christian moral ideals.

As a matter of fact, if there are any specifically "Christian" moral and political ideals, they would have to be, as indicated previously, precisely the values hidden in contemporary liberalism. The sentimental and frequently irrational presentation and application of these values must be distinguished from their ultimate nonrational ground. (If that ground is also unreal, then of course the whole *thing* is irrational and will pass.) The anger and frustration of Conservatives, confronted with what is patently a total disregard of common sense and right reason, is understandable and can be forgiven. But we *may* not confuse the data of common sense—in epistemology, the correspondence theory of truth and the principle of causality, for example, and in the political arena, the principle of subsidiarity, the notion of common good, the importance of the family, and the like (these quickly become "buzz words")—these commonplaces of a healthy human understanding *may not* be confused with Christianity merely because *they too* are being ignored and "transcended" in our time. Liberalism is an embarrassment and a thorn, to be sure, but can common sense and "right reason" be *enough* for a Christian political philosopher?

It may be the case that "good old common sense"—and Thomistic philosophy is a kind of systematized common sense, which is not to be lightly foresworn—can function as a bracing refresher in the face of liberalist simpering; and for the present a return to the healthy realisms of classical political practice (How many politicians now read Plutarch, as even Lincoln did?) may be a necessary corrective, a little *Realpolitik* to be splashed on those whose first concern is to "protect the earth"; but contemporary Conservatism is *not* "Christian Political Philosophy" any more than American Liberalism, essentially a congeries of Protestant derivatives, can be maintained on the basis of reason and nature alone.

There is however one special and nagging difficulty which seems to

militate against the possibility of a Christian political philosophy, and that is the supposed “other-worldliness” of Christianity. How can a positive political philosophy emerge from a vision of being which does not seem to take the *polis* seriously, for which the end of man is beyond and above the nature of man? A philosophy (or theology) of history, of course, and some individual moral imperatives, to be sure; but for the Christian, the city—or so it would seem—is only a *means* (and not even a necessary one at that) for the orderly achievement of a goal which completely *transcends* the political association and is not merely a happy event, for some, within it (as for Aristotle).

But here a curious *bouleversement* takes place. For the Cynics, those angry prophets of ancient philosophy, it was *wrong*, morally forbidden, to take this world and its particularities seriously; to attend to human conventions is to betray the Forms, to weaken our faith in their reality. The Cynics were a living affirmation of the “mere-ness” of this world, and, though in a somewhat reduced condition, the modality is still around.

But a Christian *may* not be a Cynic—except perhaps accidentally, in terms of rhetorical style or habit of thought. One who believes he has received the whole of creation in stewardship (the metaphor is *there* and it’s not a philosophical accommodation), may not, *dare* not disregard an essential structure of the human part of it, the city.

In the New Jerusalem there will be no buying and selling, no giving and taking in marriage—and precious little philosophizing, it must be added; but here, and now, there’s a *world* to make ready, and attention *must* be paid to bodies politic. In this, liberals and conservatives are both right; independent of the accessibility of a specifically Christian metaphysics, an effort *must* be made to develop an authentic *and* rational “Christian political philosophy.” It has not yet been achieved.

For the moment, however, “Christianity and Political Philosophy” march separately, connected and disjoined by an intention, the “and,” which at best sets them parallel, subtending, between them, an area of concern but not, together, defining a body of truth.