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HOW I BECAME A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHER

Ralph McInerny

I began graduate studies in philosophy at the University of Minnesota in the Fall quarter of 1951. My undergraduate philosophy had been done in the St. Paul Seminary where I had a number of professors who had taken their degrees at Laval University under Charles DeKoninck. In those days Laval was a redoubt of Thomism of the strict observance and my ultimate intention was to go there. But, having decided not to return to the seminary it was more immediately practical to enroll at Minnesota. Like so many decisions along the way of life, this was one made in obscurity and without any notion of its importance. But it was, I think, providential.

Minnesota was then in a golden age. Herbert Feigl, Wilfrid Sellars, John Hospers, and May Brodbeck formed the analytic/positivist main group in the department. D. B. Terrell, who was to become an expert on Brentano, was the youngster of the department. And Paul Holmer was already massively *sui generis* and for many of us a mentor. I wrote my master's dissertation with Holmer and am eternally grateful to him for introducing me to Kierkegaard. Minnesota was on the quarter system so one took a great many courses: I took four each from Sellars and Holmer, had logic from Brodbeck, contemporary philosophy with Terrill, and minored in classics.

That year at Minnesota established three points of reference for my philosophizing. The first was supplied by such dominant figures as Feigl and Sellars, heirs of the Vienna Circle, and champions of a philosophy that snuggled up as close as possible to science, hopeful that some of its prestige would rub off on its own lesser efforts. Holmer on the other hand taught courses in Jaspers, in Kierkegaard, in Cassirer, that provided an alternative to the analytic element. Above all, Holmer's courses intimated when they did not assert the role of religious faith in the philosopher's enterprise. The third point on the triangle was Thomism. Sellars, with whom I studied Descartes, Leibniz and Kant, was amused by papers in which I sought to juxtapose Kant and Aquinas, Descartes and Thomism. He was certain that immersion in the empiricists would be my salvation. My dissertation was called *A Thomistic Evaluation of Kierkegaard*. Without fully realizing it, I was undertaking to philosophize thomistically but with constant reference to the secularizing philosophizing of Feigl/Sellars and the Christian fideism of a Holmer. I went on

to Laval where I took my doctorate under DeKoninck and deepened my understanding of St. Thomas.

After a year at Creighton, I joined the philosophy department at Notre Dame in 1955. During my first years here—I think of them now as preconiliar years—there was a common effort to work from a shared Thomistic base in the direction of ongoing contemporary philosophy with an eye to finding a distinctive synthesis of the best of the best. That was predicated on sharing a common basis, an assumption that would be destroyed by the attitude induced by Vatican II. In the mid-1960s many who had hitherto been committed Thomists suddenly announced that they were through with all that and must now be thought of as analytic philosophers, existentialists, phenomenologists, Whiteheadians, etc. At its lowest level, there was an unseemly desire to join whatever was taken to be in the philosophical ascendancy. We ended up with variety but no rationale for it. I wrote *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* in 1966 and it can serve as a contemporary record of those days.

When the Fellowship of Christian Scholars was formed I came to it out of a different background than believers who had, let us say, accepted as good money what they had learned in graduate school and only later came to see that the dominant views posed difficulties for their Christian beliefs. As neophytes, we were confronted by the received opinion, more assumed than expressed, that the serious pursuit of philosophy would lead inevitably to the fading away of religious faith. Discussions of “religious language,” the defenses even more than the attacks, offered a stone rather than bread to the believing philosopher. And of course we were all supposed to know that attempts to prove the existence of God must fail, there being no God.

Believing philosophers needed air, they needed space in which they could reflect in a receptive, not a hostile, way on their beliefs and on the relations of faith and philosophy. It had become tiresome to spend so much time showing that you were not speaking nonsense. It was altogether too much like being asked if one had stopped beating one’s wife. What was needed was a coming together of philosophers for whom faith was not an embarrassment or impediment to philosophy, but its spur and support. There was need for a Society of Christian Philosophers.

The effort took two main forms. First, there was the *tu quoque* or “So’s your old man” approach. Some of the hilarious assumptions of proponents of a secularized philosophy had to be displayed to public amusement. No one is more adept at this than Al Plantinga, a sign of which is that the procedure came to be called *alvinizing*. One who professed to find insuperable difficulties in the existence of God was shown that he must then have similar difficulties with other minds. The second form was illustrated by the introduction of topics such as atonement and the Trinity and the like to the philosophical agenda on the assumption that there was no law preventing a philosopher from turning his mind to these. It is here that I must confess I have misgivings about our success.

To put it Thomistically, I think there has often been a blurring of the distinction between philosophy and theology. If philosophy is discourse that pins itself to truths that are in the public domain, so that an argu-

ment must always be hooked up to the things that in principle everybody knows, those being the starting points or principles of philosophy, theology pins itself to truths that are taken to be such on the basis of divine faith, e.g. the Incarnation, Trinity, atonement, etc. Discussion of these by philosophers can suggest that there are principles in the public domain sufficient to guide one in such discussions. But of course there is nothing here to discuss of a truth-bearing kind apart from faith. It is revelation that delivers such truths to us and the grace of faith is the name for the acceptance of them as true. But this is to pin one's arguments to truths that are not in the public domain, that is, what any mind can in principle be taken to know.

One reaction to this is to say that Augustine was not as demanding as Thomas and seems to jumble up philosophy and faith without hesitation. This is a large matter, of course, but in the end it seems to me to amount to a decision to engage in theology rather than philosophy—but without a net. The net would be an overt appeal to revelation.

I should add that there are many Thomists nowadays who downplay the difference between philosophy and theology, and who suggest that there can be no such thing as Thomistic philosophy. Another large subject and one that I shall address in my Gifford lectures at Glasgow in '99. The bright side to this is that it becomes inescapable that reflections on the Trinity and Incarnation, those at any rate that are truth-bearing, begin with the truth of those mysteries. With faith. With revelation. We as a society have had occasion to encounter head-on the chaos of biblical scholarship. As a Catholic, I find a reading of Vatican II's *Dei verbum* an indispensable guide in these matters. Charlotte Allen's forthcoming book (Free Press) *The Human Christ: The Quest for the Historical Jesus* makes all too clear what can be expected from the *soi-disant* experts in this area. Kierkegaard cited Lichtenburg on the Bible: "Such books are mirrors, if a monkey looks in, no apostle looks out."

One finds in St. Anselm the teaching that the souls of the blessed are meant to take the places left vacant in heaven by the fallen angels. When I look at the post-conciliar history of the Catholic church, particularly in universities, I am gripped with an Anselmian hope that philosophers will flow from the society to take the places of those of my generation who have been such inadequate custodians of the faith. *Ut unum sint*, as Our Lord prayed. May they be one.

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