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The Evangelical Quarterly

JULY 15th, 1938

RELIGION AND ACTUAL IDEALISM.

I

To Modernism are due the first of Gentile's writings on the nature of the relations between science and religion, philosophy and religion, politics and religion. From his book on Modernism, *Il Modernismo*, and especially from its chapter devoted to the relation between Modernism and the papal Encyclical *Pascendi* we can chiefly gather his ideas about religion and its relation to philosophy as the philosopher understands it. He defines Modernism "uno dei fatti di maggiore interesse spirituale e filosofico; forse il piu importante dal punto di vista storico generale e della Kulturgeschichte," but in spite of it, Modernism roused in him a strong sense of philosophical hostility, whereby, he pretending to look coldly on the eagerness and vain efforts brought about by modern Catholics, chides them in an air of superiority, and warns them either to submit to the authority of their Church unconditionally or to break away from it altogether, since there is no possibility of striking reasonably a happy medium.

Gentile sides with the Encyclical *Pascendi* against Modernism, and naturally his attitude is quite consistent with the theory he formulates of Religion—if Religion has to be looked upon as he understands it, and if man's spiritual activities can be so clearly woven into the schemes of his philosophical conception, no one could raise the least objection.

Gentile's theory of Religion draws its origin from the idealistic principles laid down by the German philosophers, especially Hegel, and the Italian philosopher is one of the best of his interpreters. Though Modernists consider him as Hegelian, no less important places are occupied in his philosophical development by the greatest ancient and modern thinkers. Vico

and Kant play an important part in his line of thought, and in Spaventa's work the basic principles of Gentile's world-intuitions are to be found already. The idea of man as the self-consciousness of the world; History conceived as the progressive self-realisation and self-revelation of the human mind, and especially that of the State as the highest and fullest embodiment of Mind on earth, are Gentile's most basic principles. Already Hegel in his "Lectures on the philosophy of Religion" showed himself, as nowhere else, perfectly conscious of the nature of thought as a living process. And obviously for the last exponent of German Idealism the true ideal religion is religious philosophy. Hegel's God, in fact, is Truth as Thought. Since, therefore, the supreme value is thought, everything is of value as far as it is thought in its highest form, namely, philosophy. For Hegel religion and philosophy, art and philosophy, are essential and distinct forms of the human spirit; but they are not opposite terms such as being and not-being. They maintain their own autonomy. Hegel wanted to rescue them from the then prevailing tendency to merge them into a lower sphere of practice and feeling. He takes religion out of this sphere and puts it on a higher level, in the very world of the spirit which is for him speculative thought. At this point a problem arises as to the nature of the difference between religion and philosophy. If both, as we learn, are essentially forms of thought, an answer has to be given as regards their relation to each other. No satisfactory answer could be given to the problem. Indeed no definite line of difference could be drawn between the two. Even considering religion as a naïve form of philosophy, the confusion between the two is not by any means avoided. In fact Hegel himself, when he forgets the autonomy with which he endows art and religion, swings to the other extreme and sinks them into speculative thought. It was Gentile's task to clear his predecessor's theory of this misty vagueness and to bring forth a more systematic conception to fit the schemes of actual idealism. The old idealistic principle is resumed with Gentile and carried on to its utmost consequences. Gentile's view of religion is far deeper than Croce's, and intimately connected with his theory of spirit as essentially self-realising act.

Reality required by Kant as relative to thought was ultimately identified with it by Hegel. Thus reality became the spirit in act, namely its process. Process always implies identifi-

cation and differentiation. It operates by creating distinctions within each moment, and then by referring them again to itself, as the subject, and thus creating the unity of the new moment in which they are preserved.

Unity is ever growing into multiplicity, and this is ever being resolved into unity.

These are the forms of Becoming or Spirit—the only real individual—in which through the eternal process of self-differentiation and self-unification universality and individuality perfectly coincide.

II

Now, Philosophy, according to Gentile, is the fullest self-consciousness of the Spirit as a unity and a process; of the Spirit being finally aware of its history and nature as its own objectivity. For philosophy, God, the Spirit, are not a reality separate and other than the human spirit. It is thus that philosophy is placed by Gentile on the very peak of human knowledge as the moment and act by which man knows himself as the world's self-consciousness.

Religion is only a moment of this process. Since spirit is always, as it were, becoming aware of itself as *subject*, going out of itself to itself as *object* and returning to and knowing itself as the *living synthesis* of both, Religion finds its place just in this second moment in which spirit discovers *itself as object*.

The absolute otherness of the object as object fills the mind with its presence, and obscures the consciousness that the object is none other but mind itself. Hence God is generated and stands out assuming a character of absoluteness before which man, forgetting himself, annihilates himself. Man adores now his own shadow—for God is all that the Spirit knows while not knowing itself—God is the object taken apart from its relation to the subject and thereby clothed with the character of absoluteness and infinity.

The expression of the agnosticism lying at the root of all religions finds its explanation in this very fact. Hence God is the *Deus absconditus*, the immutable, the unknowable one. God's transcendent reality, therefore, is nothing but man's self-oblivion and self-annihilation—the which feelings and not the affirmation of God's transcendence are to be considered, according to Gentile, the most deeply religious amongst the elements of Religion.

But this self-annihilation being an act of the subject, Mind will not linger in the religious moment any more than it stopped in the artistic moment.

An aesthetic element essential to all religion, acts as a curb against utter self-annihilation and, at the same time, as a link to the higher subjectivity of philosophy in which mind becomes aware that the object, God, is mind itself as object.

An analogous phenomenon takes place in the artistic moment to which a religious element also is essential, whereby the artist bows in adoration before the issue of his genius. Man is driven out, as it were, of his lyrical subjectivity.

In fact Gentile himself confesses: "There is no spirit so full of God, so filled with the emotion of the Divine which is pure objectivity, but feels driven to convey its emotion and conviction to attribute to itself the capacity to do and be something on its own account, to weave theological syllogisms on the truths it owes to superior grace . . . and the more ardent faith is, the deeper the feelings of one's unreality and of God's all-inclusiveness, the mightier is the spiritual energy of the subject engaged in creating such situations." But a hasty conclusion, according to the philosopher, has to be carefully avoided, namely, that philosophy can destroy religion. Gentile warns us against this conclusion, and tells us that philosophy does not destroy religion but only displaces the interpretation which religion gives of itself.

In fact, in his studies on Pedagogy, Gentile criticises Canducci's poetical thought embodied in the following verse

" Muor Giove e l'inno del poeta resta "

as unphilosophical. For Jupiter does not die as art does not die, being the two essential elements of the Spirit, and in consequence eternal.

III

From what has been said above we are now able to understand Gentile's attitude towards Modernism, viewed by him as "uno dei grandi scontri fatali che nella storia della umanità devono necessariamente accadere tra la religione che è la filosofia delle moltitudini e la filosofia che è la religione dello spirito o se si vuole dei suoi più alti rappresentanti".

Modernism is therefore a fatal collision between religion that is the philosophy of the multitudes and the true philosophy

that is the true religion of the spirit or the latter's highest representatives (i.e. philosophers).

In fact philosophy aims more and more at resolving the contradiction lying in the very root of the religious element, by gradually eliminating the opposition, between the finite and the infinite.

On this very principle Gentile judges Modernists and accuses them of an inmost contradiction. These have got a philosophical weakness that causes them to waver between transcendental and empirical immanence. Moreover, this contradiction lies in a principle (Transcendence) which cannot be consistent with their method (immanence). Transcendental Immanence is a contradiction in terms, and the immanence of such Modernists is only an empirical immanence, in so far as man transcends his empirical self by overcoming his flesh, for to profess that God is man, and can be in man, while man is still other than God, must be an evident contradiction.

Therefore, he says, all the truth in Modernism is only in what it takes out of modern philosophy—and that is all right—But to this, Modernism ties up the old things it wants to keep still, namely the Old God—and that is all wrong.

Gentile celebrates the deep spiritual meaning of Modernism and greets it as a triumph of modern philosophy burst at last into the old institutions, in which human religion, all pervaded by the ancient philosophy—all through substantially platonic—had embodied itself. But here he warns again the naïve Modernist that subjectivism, once admitted, cannot be overcome, and that, the Encyclical *Pascendi* is right to put modernists in the same category as those agnostics whose theories logically issue in atheism. Indeed in Gentile's opinion the Encyclical "*Pascendi dominici gregis*" is a masterly exposition, and an excellent criticism of the philosophical principles of all Modernism—and it is in vain that they cry the papal document down. Whoever—he says—wrote the encyclical has caught deeply and interpreted, as a critic *emunctae naris*, the philosophical, theological, apologetic, historical, critical and social tendencies of the modernist postulates. The replies to the Encyclical therefore, are devoid of any scientific value, though they possess an historical one of great interest. If we give credit to Gentile, even Blondel's philosophy is atheistic no more no less than Loisy's. The attempt to bring about the union of faith and science is hopeless in the sense, that it is not rational—and vain

is the attempt to reconcile science and religion with the intention of keeping for the latter its place in the modern life of men and justifying the hold it still has on their mind. Apologetic and history cannot keep on to the same line of method since the believer cannot be a dispassionate historian. The believer's mind is prepossessed, and his conclusions are determined before his investigations are set forth. As a matter of fact science put at the service of apologetics can only harm religion. For, though it is not a case of inferiority or superiority as regards science and religion, scientific standards cannot be applied to a form of life the value of which is not scientific. Religion, therefore, would appear as falling short of the scientific standard and in consequence as inferior to that form whose value is scientific.

But the enhanced heterogeneity and the impossibility of measuring the one by the standard of the other, do not imply any inferiority to each other. Religion is in itself a form of the life of the mind with a standard and value of its own as well as science. Though science, religion and philosophy have got their formal object in common, viz., truth, their constitutive object is peculiar to each one, science having a particular and definite field of investigation, whereas religion and philosophy have got as their constitutive object, the manifestation of truth in its universal forms. No rivalry whatever, then, can be feared between science and religion, because they are not of the same kind, and are unable to compete in any way. Such a conception, however, clearly embodied into a lucid scheme, might be doubted on the ground that man's experience is a universe in which every activity of human spirit and every branch of knowledge are reciprocally affected in a perfectly welded whole. The philosopher will answer us that this perfectly welded whole is not an undifferentiated whole. The Catholic religion, therefore, which embodies the second moment of the eternal process of the mind, as clothed in an ancient millenary institution, cannot, however progressing, overcome itself and become the antithesis of itself in the sense of Tyrrell and Loisy. This truth so hard to our modernists

“ A Dio spiacenti, ed ai nemici sui ”

runs like a refrain from beginning to end of the Encyclical of the 8th September, 1907. The Catholic religion is what has to be. Its strength lies, indeed, in the equilibrium between

piety on the one hand and social organisation on the other, between freedom and authority. Moreover, this Catholicity cannot die, for Plato is immortal and a great many will always look for God's revelation from the top of Sinai.

Gentile claims to have suppressed the old transcendent absolute, but we can say that his beloved task has only succeeded in *immanentising* (for even to him the mystery is as dark as to us) the old transcendent absolute by identifying it with each moment and act, and at the same time, with the whole process of experience, and has merely transferred to experience the mystery of the origin and perpetuation of the process.

In Italy, Neo-Idealism, was mainly represented by Bertrando Spaventa who endeavoured to vindicate the reality and sovereignty of spiritual values against Naturalism, by means of explaining away transcendence, and consequently any spiritual power independent of or above the State. It is Spaventa who conceived the mission of the State to realise historically the Hegelian resolution of religion into philosophy and the identity of Church and State, of man and God, and Gentile, in the footsteps of his master, installs in the place of the transcendent absolute the nationalist State.

The worship of the State is the highest achievement of Gentile's philosophy, and it explains the comparative success and significance of the Italian Neo-Idealism.

Furthermore Gentile's philosophy claims to be Fascism's philosophy.

IV

A work by Adriano Tilgher *Filosofia delle morali* (Studio sulle forze, le forme, gli stili della vita morale. Roma-Bardi-1937) has been issued recently. Buonaiuti writes, in his *Religio*, an enthusiastic comment on this work. To Buonaiuti this philosophical essay by Tilgher, seems a robust, vigorous, solid work appearing after so many flabby and lifeless ones during years and years of sterile pseudo-speculation.

The very pith and marrow of the book, its problems and method of dealing with these, lie in that very sphere wherein religion and philosophy meet; sphere considered already overcome by a pseudo-Idealism, whose foolish ingeniousness used to call "backward" those who felt keenly interested in the religious problem. The book which reflects the dramatic reality of our tortured contemporary soul, means to be a revenge

over pseudo-Idealism and a revaluation of those fundamental religious and Christian ideas, that cannot but prove fresh because eternal—whereas the philosophy of to-day buries that of yesterday. The ancient schools of philosophy are said to have lasted for centuries. Once one entered a philosophical school one never left it so long as one lived. To bid farewell to one school in order to join another was looked upon as an act of betrayal and apostasy.

But things are altogether different as regards the once flourishing Italian Idealistic school to-day! Enthusiasm is cooling down and the time of pupils thronging the halls to listen to the new revelation of the absolute actualism, is gone for ever!

One by one the best followers of Gentile take leave of the Master, and now it is Professor Armando Carlini's turn, the proto-disciple, the Cephas of the Actualistic School.

But what is the worst of all, the Idealistic School is dwindling away not only in the storm of raging controversies—which after all is purely reasonable—but in a storm of personal insults of which the pupils—following the examples of their Masters—are exceedingly lavish with one another—As far as we know if “*magna parvis componere licet*” neither Plato dealt in such a way with Aristotle, nor Kant with Fichte, nor Fichte with Schelling, nor Schelling with Hegel and so on to the end of the chapter.

Polemic—when it arose—was only confined to the philosophical field. A pregnant, though very simple conclusion, is allowed to be drawn from what has been said above. If an intellectual association is built on that love, which is due to truth, personal feelings of resentment and angry personal attacks will find no place even when fierce controversy rages and fumes. But when personal feelings and personal attacks are brought into play, then it is evident enough that the so-called intellectual association has been built up upon a widely different foundation. It is the house built on sand, and the result will follow sooner or later with pressing logicity. The poet Rilke used to say that every man grows up within himself the seed of that death of which he will die. On the same metaphorical line, we are allowed to conclude that even as regards the Italian Actualistic School, by the fruits (the way it dies) the tree is judged (the way it lived).

M. C. CASELLA.

Dublin.