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Étienne Gilson's Christian Philosophy of Creation

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ABSTRACT: When the name "Étienne Gilson" is mentioned, a multitude of appropriate phrases and notions easily come to mind due to Gilson's significant contributions in multiple areas of philosophical scholarship. Two of those areas concern 1) the notion of Christian philosophy, as well as 2) the metaphysics of Aquinas. In fact, Gilson would consider the *exercise* of the latter—that is, the explication and application of Thomistic metaphysics to reality—to be a significant portion of the *exercise* of the former. In the following paper, I aim to show Gilson's doctrine of creation, while significantly inspired by his reading of the metaphysics of Aquinas, is first and foremost, an exercise in Christian philosophical inquiry. To this end, in Part One, I will first give a brief explanation of what Christian philosophy is for Gilson and, secondly, will show how Gilson regards the *philosophical* treatment of creation to be an act of Christian philosophy. Part Three will consist in a brief textual treatment of Gilson's Christian philosophy of creation from the emphasis on the doctrine *qua philosophical understanding* to the doctrine as influenced by C*hristianity*.

1. Gilson, the Notion of Christian Philosophy, and Creation

To explain Gilson's meaning of Christian philosophy can prove to be quite difficult in a short space, given that he used the phrase and wrote on the topic for over fifty years. Not only could one write entire essays on the topic, a comprehensive historical treatment would necessarily merit a dissertation of

extensive length.[1] To remedy this, one must choose to take snapshots of Gilson's understanding of Christian philosophy at a few given fixed points to provide at the least an accurate, even if non-exhaustive, working understanding of his use of the phrase. To this end, the first treatment to which we will turn is his 1931-32 Gifford Lectures published as *L'esprit de la Philosophie medievale*.[2]

In this work, Gilson provides, in order: the content of Christian philosophy, how one becomes a Christian philosopher in act, and subsequently a working definition for the phrase. Regarding the content, Gilson comments upon the act of *fides quaerens intellectum* of an Augustine or an Anselm to build up such a rational body of knowledge under Christian motivation. He says,[3]

> … this effort of truth believed to transform itself into truth known, is truly the life of Christian wisdom, and the body of rational truths resulting from the effort is Christian philosophy itself. Thus the content of Christian philosophy is that body of rational truths discovered, explored, or simply safeguarded, thanks to the help that reason receives from revelation.

While yet broadly construed for the moment, we can say at this point that what he regards to be contained within the "body" of Christian philosophy is any rational investigation and development of truths which were originally initiated under the impetus of Christian revelation and the life of faith.

Nevertheless, what may need further clarification is how such truly "rational truths" remain rational while also being "discovered", "explored", or "safeguarded" with the help of Christian revelation. Gilson here has in mind most especially St. Thomas' notion of the *preambles of the faith*, which—while also contained within

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[1] Cf. James Capehart 2018: "Étienne Gilson and the First Two Stages of His Christian Philosophy" (PhD diss., University of St. Thomas, Houston, TX), as well as Capehart 2021: "Étienne Gilson: Three Stages and Two Modes of His Christian Philosophy, *Forum Philosophicum* 26: 51–84.

[2] Étienne Gilson 1931-32: *L'esprit de la Philosophie medievale*, trans. A. H. C Downes as *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*. All subsequent references to this work will be from the Downes English translation.

[3] Gilson 1931-32: *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 34–35.

Christian revelation—are capable of philosophical proof and explanation. This is seen to be the case when Gilson explains how he regards one to act as a Christian philosopher:[4]

> What he asks himself is simply this: whether, among those propositions which by faith he believes to be true, there are not a certain number which reason may know to be true. In so far as the believer bases his affirmations on the intimate conviction gained from faith he remains purely and simply a believer, he has not entered the gates of philosophy; but when amongst his beliefs he finds some capable of becoming objects of science then he becomes a philosopher, and if it is to the Christian faith that he owes this new philosophical insight, he becomes a Christian philosopher.

Thus, the contents of Christian philosophy are then those truths which, while in fact initially revealed, are discovered to be "objects of science", that is, objects of philosophical investigation. While a Christian may legitimately remain on the level of belief in those teachings, it is through the philosophical investigation of these objects originally obtained under Christian impetus that one takes the step from Christian *simpliciter* to Christian *philosopher*.

Likewise, such truths which are in principle rationally attainable but which have been revealed because of both their importance for salvation and because of the difficulty to attain them without such aid, are precisely the *preambles of faith*, such as God's existence, and man's origin and relations with God, including that causal relationship between creature and Creator. However, to be clear, for Gilson, Christianity aids philosophy not in providing content within premises, but rather with regards to suggesting *topics* or *areas* for rational investigation.[5] As

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[4] Ibid, 36.

[5] On the idea that Christianity influences the development of Christian philosophy by suggesting starting points for rational investigation—which would have otherwise been overlooked without such aid—was championed by one of Gilson's disciples, Joseph Owens. While Owens' treatment is his own, it is remarkably faithful to the spirit of Gilson and provides a helpful interpretive key for correctly understanding and reading Gilson on Christian philosophy. Cf. Joseph Owens 1990: *Towards a Christian Philosophy*, 25–26: "In a

Gilson explains, "Since the Christian revelation teaches us only those truths which are necessary to salvation, its influence could extend only to those parts of philosophy that concern the existence and nature of God, and the origin, nature, and destiny of the soul."[6] Topics such as God's nature and existence, as well as man's place within that symphony of causal care and dependence are commonly investigated rationally by Christian philosophers after having received the suggestion of such topics through at *least* a basic catechetical Christian teaching if not in a more substantial theological training.[7]

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corresponding way the interests of Christian belief can bring the mind to see in things a number of philosophical starting points that otherwise might be missed. The revealed doctrine of creation in time led inquiring Christian minds to focus, for instance, on the problem of change without a subject that changed, on the notions of duration before and after time, on the beginning and ending of the temporal continuum in either a part or an indivisible, and on the extent of the power required for bridging the gap from nothing to being. Interest in the revealed doctrine of the Trinity, with three Persons the same in nature and in being, but really distinct from each other in relation, concentrated attention on what a real relation is and on how it does not increase the absolute being in a thing. The revealed doctrines of bodily resurrection and of Eucharistic presence led to closer looks at individuation and substance, and the problems these entailed. The belief in a supernatural destiny for mankind and the consequent reality of grace centered attention upon the naturally observable defects and frustrations of human nature and on the functioning of habituation as something really added to the nature itself." N.B. Owens notes how both *preambles of faith* (creation in time) as well as *mysteries of faith* (the Trinity, the Resurrection, and the Eucharist) have factually suggested topics for philosophical investigation and development, to be clear, and while these points are in alignment with Gilson's view, Gilson would also emphasize that the *preambles of faith* more directly influence Christian philosophy, as these topics can more directly be brought into philosophy, while *the mysteries of faith* as such cannot. As he notes in endnote 2 of Chapter 20 of 1931-32: *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 485: "Thus, unlike the ideas of creation, conscience, moral law or intention, the Trinity and the Incarnation can never be integrated with philosophy. They belong of right to theology, and therefore I have not touched upon them in this study."

[6] Gilson 1931-32: *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 38.

[7] This brings to mind two important points which should be considered. Firstly, this emphasis on starting points is not meant to suggest that Christianity only influences the Christian philosopher through the suggestion of *objective data*. For Gilson there is the positive *subjective*

This provides much needed background for his landmark definition of Christian philosophy in *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*: "Thus I call Christian, *every philosophy which, although keeping the two orders formally distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation as an indispensable auxiliary to reason*."[8] Thus, for Gilson, the notion of Christian philosophy refers to a legitimate exercise of the philosophical use of reason as seeking to explicate or demonstrate certain objects of knowledge about God and man, which otherwise at least *de facto* would probably not have been acquired without the aid of revelation, but not necessarily *de iure*. One of these areas which Gilson regards to be commonly held at least originally by faith and subsequently to be developed philosophically as Christian philosophical acts concerns the notion of creation ex nihilo.

In his 1924 *La philosophie de saint Bonaventure*, Gilson provides an early glimpse of a foundation for a broad, topical philosophical commonality among Christian philosophers such as St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure which includes the common acceptance and treatment of creation *ex nihilo*:[9]

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influence of grace. Secondly, the positive influence of Christianity on the development of philosophy is not just a one way street, but rather once ennobled, Christian philosophy in turn may better help with a more rigorous development of Christian theology. In a text from his 1936 *Christianisme et Philosophie*, Gilson gives evidence of both of these points when explaining Leo XIII's notion of Christian philosophy in the 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, also titled *On Christian Philosophy*: "It is here indeed a question of philosophy: philosophia; of a philosophy which is truly the work of natural reason: naturalis ratio; of a natural philosophy, however, which facilitates the access to faith; iter ad fidem aperire; which can do so today better than ever because the grace of Christ has restored and augmented the powers of natural reason: instauravit et auxit. Such is the exercise of reason that the title of the Encyclical designates by the name of Christian philosophy…." from the English translation by Ralph MacDonald as *Christianity and Philosophy*, 92. Thus, reason is restored in grace though still remaining *natural*. However, thus restored, it is likewise better able to supply aid to the understanding of the faith. This reading of Leo XIII is fully in line with Gilson's understanding of Christian philosophy, as well.

[8] Ibid, 37.

[9] Étienne Gilson 1924: *La philosophie de saint Bonaventure*, from the English translation Dom Illtyd Trethowan and F. J. Sheed, as *The Philosophy of Saint Bonaventure*, 494. All subsequent references to this work will be from this 1938 English edition.

> As against pantheism both of them teach creation from nothing and maintain that the gulf is infinite between absolute Being and contingent. As against ontologism, both deny explicitly that God can be seen at all by the human mind in this life, and *a fortiori* they deny that habitual knowledge of God which ontologism attributes to us. As against fideism, they both set the most thorough effort of the intellect to prove the existence of God and interpret the data of faith. As against rationalism, both co-ordinate the effort of the intellect with the act of faith and maintain the beneficent influence of the habit of faith upon the operations of the intellect.

By these four points, Gilson provides a foundational framework for any Christian philosopher working out a Christian philosophy, though they are by no means exhaustive. Still, the second through fourth are foundational to the first, as he maintains that Christian philosophers such as St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure reject *ontologism* and *fideism*, positions which both maintain that seeking to know God's existence philosophically are either superfluous or not possible. Likewise, they also reject a *rationalism* which would deny the beneficent influence of faith upon reason. Moreover, when seeking to explicate the notion of *creation ex nihilo* in a philosophical manner, Christian philosophers in act are manifesting simultaneously a rejection of that ontologism, fideism, and rationalism, and are affirming that there is valid knowledge obtainable about the creator from his effects in creatures. While the "gulf is infinite", the Christian philosophical treatment of the causal relationship between creatures and Creator is possible and beneficial. Furthermore, while this topic has prominence of importance for the Christian due to the spotlighting of Christian revelation, I hope to show that for Gilson, the notion of creation *ex nihilo* remains a *preamble of faith* at least in principle, albeit a notion far more obscure in the hierarchy of rationally obtainable truths. With these thoughts in mind let us turn to a textual treatment of Gilson's Christian philosophy of Creation.

2. Brief Textual Treatment of Gilson's Christian Philosophy of Creation[10]

2.1 From *Le Thomisme,* 3rd edition (1927)[11]

In treating of this early work, we will intentionally emphasize the *philosophical* dimension in Gilson's understanding of creation, as this early exposition of St. Thomas does indeed focus on Thomistic doctrines from that perspective. Nevertheless, he does speak of St. Thomas' philosophy as an instantiation of Christian philosophy in that work.[12] With this in mind, let us venture to ask: what then is meant by the word "creation"? For certain, it is a kind of causality, but what sets it apart from, say, generation or other kinds of becoming? In reply to the first question, Gilson will note the following:[13]

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[10] Here it is beneficial to provide a small translation key for the following section. Where Gilson is referring to *esse*, it is typically translated as "being", "existence", or even "act of being." Where he is referring to *ens*, it is typically translated as "a being."

[11] Étienne Gilson 1927: *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd English edition revised and enlarged, authorized translation from the 3rd revised and enlarged edition of *Le Thomisme* (Vrin, 1927), trans. Edward Bullough (Heffer and Sons, 1929). All subsequent references to this edition of *Le Thomisme* will be from this 1929 translation. N.B. It should be noted that in texts cited from this work, Gilson is providing his interpretation of St. Thomas' position on creation. Nevertheless, I think the subsequent treatment will show that Gilson's own position significantly aligns with that interpreted position.

[12] Cf. Gilson, 1927: *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 28-29: "What then is philosophy? St. Thomas has never practiced or conceived it, except in its proper place within the hierarchic structure of Christian Wisdom, and therefore, no doubt, it never occurred to him to detach it from it and to give it a special name. Yet it might have a name, because it existed and had a name long before St. Thomas transformed it and marked it so deeply with his impress: it is the 'Christian Philosophy.' We mean by this a philosophy which intends to be a rational interpretation of data, but considers as the essential element of these data the religious Faith, the object of which is defined by the Christian revelation."

[13] Gilson, 1927: *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 132.

> We speak of creation whenever something which was not, begins to be. In other words, there is creation wherever a transition occurs from non-being to being, in other words, from nothingness to being. Applying this notion to all existing things, we may say that creation, which is the emanation of all being, consists in the act whereby all things pass from non-being or nothingness to being.

But to be clear, "nothingness" should not be reified as some kind of pre-existing state. As he says, "God has not created the world from nothing in the sense that He caused it to issue from nothing as from a sort of pre-existing matter, but in the sense that, after the nothing, being appeared. 'Creating from nothing', in short, means 'not creating from something.'"[14] Because of this lack of initial state, creation properly speaking is not movement as in the sense of movement or change in physics which presupposes an initial substrate or state from which or out of which the change or movement takes place. Yet, given that lack of initial state, he will go on to say preliminarily that creation can also be viewed as, "the acceptance of being."[15]

Furthermore, God alone has the power to create, as only he does not presuppose receiving existence from another. As Gilson explains:[16]

> All creation by a creature must evidently presuppose the existence of that creature. But we know that the creative act presupposes nothing anterior to itself, and this is as true of the efficient Cause as of matter. It simply causes being to follow upon non-being. Creative power is consequently incompatible with the condition of the creature which is on the contrary incapable of acting except by means of being and of the powers previously received.

Only God can truly create because only he is Being Itself—or also, *Being per se*—rather than having being by another as in the case of all creatures. As he goes on further to say, "God, on the contrary, as Being *per se*, can also cause being; and as He is the only being *per se*, He is also the only one who can produce the very

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid, 133.

[16] Ibid, 134-135.

existence of other beings. Corresponding to this unique mode of being, there is a unique mode of causality: creation is the act proper to God."[17] Thus, the act of creation is a mode of causality which is uniquely suited for the Divine essence which is existence Itself.

Two important questions will then arise for Gilson for further understanding creation, *viz.* 1) "whether God created things by necessity of nature", and 2) how God's simplicity could be the source of the multiplicity in creatures.[18] Regarding the former question, Gilson notes three reasons from St. Thomas to maintain that God created out of free choice and not out of necessity. The first reason concerns the teleology of the created universe. As the universe acts towards an end, it does so only because of an intelligence which gives it that end. As he explains, "In short: nature tends towards an end only because it is moved and directed to it by a being endowed with will and intelligence; as an arrow tends towards the aim because the direction is given to it by the archer."[19] Furthermore, as God creates nature to act according to its proper ends, his very act of creation must itself be one rooted in his intelligence and will rather than by necessity: "If, therefore, nature tends towards an aim assigned to it by an intelligence, the first being who gave it its end and its disposition in view of this end, must have created it, not out of necessity of his nature, but out of His intelligence and will."[20]

The second reason he notes concerns the fact that if something acts by nature, it does so always unless impeded. Still, with God, were he to create by necessity he could not but produce according to his infinite nature. As Gilson notes, "If, therefore, He acted by necessity of nature, He would produce a sort of infinite and determinate being; but two simultaneous infinities are impossible; it is consequently self-contradictory that God should act by necessity of nature."[21] Thus, God's creation must be not by the necessity of nature but out of free choice,

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[17] Ibid, 135.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid, 136.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid, 136-137.

otherwise his creation would in fact be to produce another determinate being simultaneously infinite in nature, which is impossible according to the Divine unity. Additionally, the third reason concerns the relation of creatures as effects to God as cause. As creaturely effects pre-exist in their cause in the mode of being of this cause, they do so in the intelligible mode of His being, and likewise proceed forth in the creative act according to that intelligible mode. However, as Gilson explains, "For the inclination of God to accomplish what His intelligence has conceived, falls into the sphere of His will. Consequently, it is the will of God that is the first Cause of all things."[22]

Nevertheless, even if God creates out of free choice and not by necessity, such a fact points toward the unanswered problem of how the Divine simplicity produces such a richly diverse, multiplicity of created beings. Gilson invokes the notion of the Divine ideas in order to resolve this paradox:[23]

> The real intention of God in creating all things, was therefore the order of the universe. But if the intention of God has indeed been to create the order of the universe, it follows necessarily that God has in Himself the idea of the universal order. Now, it is impossible to have the idea of a whole without having also adequate ideas of the parts composing it. Thus, the architect cannot really conceive the idea of a house, unless he forms also in himself the idea of each of its parts. It follows therefore of necessity that the proper ideas of all things must be contained in the mind of God.

As God wills the whole order of the universe to be made when he creates, he must have not only the idea of the whole but the ideas of the multiplicity of the constituent parts *as contained in the idea of the whole*. By analogy, this is also true of the architect who can only truly have the idea of the whole house if contained within that idea are the ideas of the parts which make up the whole; otherwise, such a notion of "house" would be far from complete and grossly imperfect.

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[22] Ibid, 137.

[23] Ibid, 138.

One could ask then, how does this plurality of ideas not violate the Divine simplicity? Following St. Thomas, Gilson notes the distinction between two kinds of ideas, *viz.*, ideas as copies, and ideas as models.[24] Were the ideas of things in the mind of God according to the first mode—i.e., as copies—it would indeed violate the Divine simplicity. However, it is not so if they exist according to the second mode—i.e., as models. When conceived as models, ideas are not "that *by which* the intellect knows, but *that which* the intellect knows and by which the intelligent being is able to accomplish his work."[25] Gilson then applies this specifically to God:[26]

> Now, a plurality of such ideas introduces no composition into the intellect in which they are; on the contrary, their being known is implied in the knowledge which God has of Himself. For, we said that God knows perfectly His own essence; He therefore knows it under the modes by which it is knowable. But the Divine essence can be known not only as in itself, but also as imitable in a certain manner by created things…. Accordingly, inasmuch as God knows His essence as imitable by such and such a particular creature, He has the idea of this creature. And the same applies to all others.

Thus, the plurality of ideas by which God creates the diverse multiplicity of created beings does not violate his Divine simplicity because they are none other than his knowledge of himself as imitable in and through participated, finite being.

Still, such an acknowledgment points toward a kind of insufficiency from merely emphasizing that creation out of nothing does not imply a "nothingness" as substrate *out of which*. As God's creative act is by means of his Divine ideas of things, there is a way in which all created essence derives from the Divine essence: "We know from what First Being all other beings come; they exist only because all essence is derived from the Divine essence: *omnis essentia derivatur ab essentia*

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[24] Cf. ibid, 138ff.

[25] Ibid, 139.

[26] Ibid.

divina."[27] Yet, if created essence is derived from the Divine essence, how is it that creatures are not pantheistic emanations from him? While God is the cause of the creature's existence and of all of the perfections that flow from that existence, the creaturely mode of existence is not the same as the Divine mode of existence:[28]

> Creatures have no goodness, no perfection, no particle of being which they do not hold from God; but we know already that none of all these are in the creature in the same mode as in God. The creature *is not* what it merely *has*; God *is* what He has; He *is* His being, His goodness, His perfection, and therefore creatures, though they derive their being from God since He is Being absolutely, hold it merely in a participated and defective manner which keeps them at an infinite distance from the Creator. As a pure *analogue* of Divine being, the created being can neither form an integral part of God, nor be added to, nor subtracted from Him.

Thus, as a limited mode of being, the participated being of the creature is in no way some kind of pantheistic share in God's divinity. Hence, just as the multiplicity of the ideas by which they are made does not threaten the Divine simplicity, so likewise neither does the actual existence of these limited beings instantiate a multiplicity of "gods" or "parts" of God in the world, as the creaturely mode of existence is categorically imperfect and thus not divine.

However, we approach a final question for our treatment of this work: why did God create? At the root of the answer to this is the notion that just as created goodness is diffusive of itself, all the more so is Divine goodness. As Gilson explains:[29]

> What is true of every good being in proportion as it is good, is eminently true of the Supreme Good which we call God. The tendency to propagate and communicate itself, expresses then nothing but the superabundance of an infinite Being whose perfection overflows and spreads over a hierarchy of participating

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[27] Ibid, 140, citing *De Veritate*, III, 5, ad sed contra, 2.

[28] Ibid, 140, emphasis in original.

[29] Ibid, 141.

> beings: thus the sun, without having to reason or to choose, illuminates, by the mere presence of its being, all that shares in its light.

Yet, unlike the sun, God's self-communicative creative action is not by necessity of nature, but is willed by him, as we emphasized earlier: "God, who knows His own goodness in itself and as imitable by creatures, wills it therefore both in itself and in the creatures capable of sharing it. But from the fact that such is the will of God, it does not follow that God is subject to any necessity whatever."[30]

Additionally, as He is infinite Goodness itself, this creation does not increase His goodness nor would *not* creating decrease it: "God wills necessarily His own goodness, but this goodness is in no way increased by the existence of creation; neither would it be diminished by its disappearance."[31] Furthermore, this radical dependence in being establishes a one-way relation between creatures and God: "But in reality creation establishes in God no relation to the creature; here again the relation is unilateral and holds only between the creature and the Creator as between being and its principle."[32]

In summary of the many points Gilson has made, he says the following: "We must accordingly hold firmly to this conclusion, that God wills Himself, and necessarily wills only Himself; and that, if the super-abundance of His being and of His love leads Him to will and to love Himself even in the finite participations of His being, we must see therein nothing but a free gift and nothing even remotely resembling a necessity."[33] Thus, God's creative act is not only an act of free choice by which he wills himself and does so in and through the limited, participated mode of the diversity of all creatures, but in fact is also an act of love of Himself in and through those finite participations in his being. However, this understanding of creation as ultimately an *act of Divine love* is tinged with a Christian spirit even if maintained as philosophical. It suggests the following

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid, 142.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

question: How then does Gilson see *Christianity* to have contributed to this philosophical doctrine of creation? With this in mind let us now turn our focus towards Gilson's *Christian* philosophy of creation to examine how he regards Christian revelation and the life of faith to have occasioned such a Christian philosophy which is not only a doctrine but a way of philosophizing.

2.2. From *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (Gifford Lectures of 1931-1932)

How then does Gilson regard Christianity to have influenced or occasioned this conception of creation, which, while "Thomistic" in that it is Thomas' position, he regards many aspects of it to be held greatly in common with other medieval Christian thinkers? For Gilson, it is the very name of God as expressed in Exodus 3:14 which occasions the Christian notion of the God of Being Itself as fundamental to the Christian notion of creation. As Gilson explains, "In order to know what God is, Moses turns to God. He asks His name, and straightway comes the answer: *Ego sum qui sum, Ait: sic dices filiis Israel; qui est misit me ad vos* (Exod. 3:14). No hint of metaphysics, but God speaks, *causa finita est*, and Exodus lays down the principle from which henceforth the whole of Christian philosophy will be suspended."[34] It is in this revelation of *Qui est*, that occasions the notion of God whose essence is his existence and that the contingency of all creatures is rooted in the non-identity of those created, participated principles. As he continues:[35]

> Now to say that the word *being* designates the essence of God, is to say that in God essence and existence are identical, and that in God alone essence and existence are identical. That is why St. Thomas Aquinas, referring expressly to this text of Exodus, will declare that among all divine names there is one that is eminently proper to God, namely *Qui est*, precisely because this *Qui est* signifies

[34] Gilson 1931-32: *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 51.

[35] Ibid.

nothing other than being: *non significat formam aliquam sed ipsum esse*. (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 11).

Gilson will go so far as to call this notion of God as Being Itself, "the cornerstone of all Christian philosophy …"[36]

Does this then reduce the notion of God as Being Itself or of its related notion of creation *ex nihilo* to that of an *Article/Mystery of Faith*, an object by its very nature beyond the human capacity to attain on its own? To answer this, one must for a moment switch from looking upon Gilson the historian of philosophy to Gilson the philosopher. From the perspective of the history of philosophy, Gilson clearly regards it to be a fact that the revelation of God's name in Exodus 3:14 occasioned the Christian conception of God as Being Itself. However, from the perspective of doing philosophy in the present with non-Christian philosophers, Gilson never maintains that one's non-Christian interlocutors must accept Exodus 3:14 in order to do metaphysics profitably with Christians. In fact, Gilson continued to regard the overall doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to be among the preambles of faith and therefore open to rational, philosophical development without recourse to whatever revealed source may have offered initial aid.[37]

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid, 485, endnote 2: "Such, for example, is the fact of creation, something essentially mysterious in itself, but necessarily affirmed by reason as the sole possible solution of the problem of the ultimate origin of being. God keeps his secret; but the fact that this mysterious act took place is demanded by reason. Here is the field *par excellence* for Christian philosophy, for here it may show itself as at once fully philosophic and fully Christian …" Thus, demanded by reason and fully philosophic and yet also revealed, Gilson clearly regards creation by God to be a *preamble of faith*. He further refers to the notion of God as Creator of the world explicitly to be among the *preambles of faith* in his 1936: *Christianisme et Philosophie* 56: "They are only preambles of it; precisely because they are, of themselves, accessible to reason. God exists, He is One, the Creator of the world, Intelligent and Willing, Wise and Provident: these are indeed certitudes necessary for salvation (and God has revealed them); but since they remain of themselves naturally knowable, they bear to proper beliefs the same relationship as nature bears to grace. Not so with the body of those truths which are essentially of faith; for even when

Likewise, the related notion of God as Being Itself should also be regarded a *preamble of faith* though one far more difficult to attain in a completely unaided fashion than, say, determining whether God exists. In this way, the notion of God as Being Itself is a starting point occasioned by revelation from which a Christian Metaphysical treatment may proceed to ground and develop philosophically.[38]

How then does this notion affect the doctrine of creation? Gilson reiterates that as the real identity of essence and existence is true of God, it is true only of God, and this fact has repercussions for understanding created being: "The Christian philosophers gathered from the Bible the identity of essence and existence in God; and then could hardly fail to see that such identity exists nowhere save in God."[39] Thus, created beings, whose essences are distinct from their existences, are contingent in the very order of existence, a metaphysical notion which undergirds Aristotle's world of change: [40]

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reasoning intervenes there, the value of its conclusions rests entirely on the certitude of the divine word and not inversely."

[38] Cf. *supra* footnote 5, citing Owens 1990: *Towards a Christian Philosophy*, 25-26. See also, John F.X. Knasas 1990: "Does Gilson Theologize Thomistic Metaphysics," in *Thomistic Papers V*, ed. Thomas A. Russman, OFM Cap., 3–24. In this essay, Knasas addresses the accusation that Gilson has in fact "theologized" Thomistic metaphysics through its close relationship with Christian revelation. While a full treatment of this would be deserving of another essay in itself, of importance for the account here is that Knasas does directly address Gilson's understanding of the Thomistic metaphysical notion of existence as *esse*. Is this notion, while in his view theologically prompted, still part of that objective data which is philosophically attainable and treatable—and thus in the ambit of the philosopher, whether Christian or not? Knasas argues that while later Gilson frowns on the idea of the possibility of a properly rigorous philosophical demonstration for the Thomistic notion of existence as the intrinsic act of a thing (rather than just the fact of a thing) and the consequent *real distinction* of *esse and essence* in creatures [see Knasas, 12; and also Gilson 1960: *The Elements of Christian Philosophy*, 131] he maintains that Gilson did acknowledge that the properly philosophical development of the Thomistic notion of being as *esse* is possible and begins with the judgmental grasp of *esse* in sensible things. (Cf. Knasas 1990: 17ff.)

[39] Gilson 1931-32: *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 67.

[40] Ibid, 68.

> Into Aristotle's eternal world, existing outside God and without God, the Christian philosopher introduces the distinction of essence and existence. Not only does it remain true to say that all that is, save God, might be other than it is, but it now becomes true to say that all save God might possibly not exist.

This creaturely distinction in essence and existence is the root of the creature's radical contingency, and thus of its need not only for a Creator to exist in the first place, but to remain existing at all. Gilson presents Genesis 1:1 which, similar to Exodus 3:14, does not so much "reveal" a philosophical doctrine, but rather reveals some truth about God and nature from which may be gleaned complementary *metaphysical truths* undergirding it:[41]

> "In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth" (Gen. 1:1). Here once more we have no trace of philosophy. God asserts His creative action, just as He asserts the definition of His being, without any kind of metaphysical justification. And yet between these two unproved assertions, how profound, how inevitable is the metaphysical accord! If God is Being, if He alone is Being, then all that is not God must of necessity hold its existence from God.

Thus, we have both a revealed *act of creation* and a revealed *name* of God which are nevertheless *philosophically in accord* with each other. Furthermore, in that *creative act*, He Who Is not only gives existence at an initial stage, but sustains creatures throughout their entire existence. God wills not only that creatures *be* at first, but wills their continuing *conservation in being* for as long as they exist. As Gilson further explains:[42]

> As soon as the sensible world is regarded as the result of a creative act, which not only gives it existence but conserves it in existence through all successive moments of its duration, it becomes so utterly dependent as to be struck through with contingency down to the very roots of its being. The universe is no longer

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid, 71.

> suspended from the necessity of a thought that thinks itself, it is suspended now from the freedom of a will that wills it.

Hence, the existence of a created universe which is so radically contingent depends upon a Being which thoroughly wills is to be for as long as it is.

For Gilson, this uniqueness of Christian metaphysical spirit can also be seen in Christian *philosophical* proofs for the existence of God. While there is a rich tradition among the Greeks for seeking philosophical proofs for the existence of God, Christian proofs have tended to be occasioned from yet another Biblical prompt, that of Romans 1:20. As Gilson explains, "Everyone knows that the whole speculative effort of the Fathers of the Church and the thinkers of the Middle Ages concerning the possibility of proving God from His works, hangs directly from the famous words of St. Paul in the Epistle to the Romans (i, 20): *Invisibilia Dei per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciuntur*."[43] But the import for the proofs is not so much that they then become properly revealed and hence theological, but that the notion of creation becomes at least implicit to them all:[44]

> … in the act of attaching themselves to St. Paul all Christian thinkers, ipso facto, cut themselves loose from Greek philosophy. Whoever undertakes to prove the existence of God *per ea quae facta sunt* undertakes in advance to prove His existence as Creator of the Universe; in other words he is committed to the view that the efficient cause to which the world testifies can be none other than a creative cause; and thus also that the idea of creation is necessarily implied in every demonstration of the existence of the Christian God.

However, for Gilson, this notion of creation is not limited to being just *implicit* if one is proceeding to prove God's existence by means of arguments from *efficient*

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[43] Ibid, 72; the full Latin text of the *Vulgata* from Rm 1:20a – "Invisibilia enim ipsius, a creatura mundi, per ea quæ facta sunt, intellecta, conspiciuntur…" – "For the invisible things of Him, from the creation of the world, are seen having been understood through those things which He has made…"

[44] Gilson 1931-32: *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 72-73.

causality. Such a kind of proof he calls specifically a *proof of creation*. Quoting from *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 6, he explains the following:[45]

> "We have shown by Aristotle's arguments that there exists a first efficient cause whom we call God. But the efficient cause produces the being of its effect. God, therefore, is the cause of the being of all other things." (*SCG* II, 6) Impossible to say more clearly that in the case of God, efficient causality means creative causality, and that to prove the existence of a first efficient cause is to prove the existence of a first creative cause.

As God is *ipsum esse subsistens*, his creative act is through the imparting of *esse* to each and every created thing that he makes and the subsequent conservation of those beings (*entia*) through that *esse* freely given. For Gilson, Christian revelation has propelled Christian metaphysics in general, and the Christian philosophical doctrine of creation contained within it, to become a metaphysics of *esse*. To understand this Gilsonian position more fully, let us turn to his 1960 work, *Christian Philosophy: An Introduction*.

2.3 Creation and the Metaphysics of *Esse* – From *Christian Philosophy: An Introduction* (1960)[46]

In Chapter 8 of this work ("Causality and Participation"), Gilson directly addresses how the notion of God as *ipsum esse* has affected the Christian understanding and treatment of creation. Quoting from *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 45, a. 6 where Thomas addresses whether the power to create is from a particular person—or in this case from a particular *Divine person*—Gilson notes the following resulting from the identity of *esse* and essence in God:

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[45] Ibid, 77; Latin of 1259/65: *SCG* II, 6, 2: "Ostensum est enim supra, per demonstrationem Aristotelis, esse aliquam primam causam efficientem, quam Deum dicimus. Efficiens autem causa suos effectus ad esse conducit. Deus igitur aliis essendi causa existit."

[46] Gilson 1960: *Introduction a la Philosophie Chretienne*, trans. Armand Maurer as *Christian Philosophy: An Introduction*. All subsequent citations of this work are from the Maurer English edition.

> God's essence is being itself. Now, to create is properly speaking to cause or produce the being of things: *causare, sive producere esse rerum*. Let us understand this correctly, and if necessary once again recall that basic notion of *esse* or being, conceived as distinct from that of *ens* or a being; for to the Thomist it is being, thus understood, that is here in question. In fact, "Since every cause produces something similar to itself, the principle of an action can be known by its effect. Fire is produced by fire. The act of creating (that is, the production of being) consequently belongs to God in virtue of his being, which is his essence (*creare convenit Deo secundum suum esse, quod est eius essentia*), and because essence is common to the three persons, creation is not exclusive to one person but is common to the whole Trinity."[47]

While one upshot of this text is the better understanding of how philosophical truths map on to the properly revealed doctrine of the Trinity, we also see a clear-cut example of how Gilson views the Christian metaphysics of *esse* to benefit and develop from its close kinship to Christian revelation. If by revelation we know that God is triune and that God creates, we ask the question of whether one person of the Trinity creates or whether the whole Divine being creates. Well, since God is *ipsum esse subsistens* whose *esse is his essence*, and since in creation he causes the *esse* of things, it should be said that God creates by *essence*. But since *the Divine essence* belongs to the whole Trinity then the act of creation properly belongs to the whole Trinity and not just one Divine person. Even if the final conclusion of these statements is in regards to an article of faith, the previous half of the conclusion—*viz.* that God creates *by his essence*—is something philosophically derivable from the identity of essence and *esse* in God, something which we maintain to be in the ambit of the preambles of faith, though one of extreme obscurity and difficulty to attain without the previous aid of revelation.

[47] Gilson 1960: *Christian Philosophy*, 90, quoting from 1266-68: *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 45, a. 6c.

Furthermore, Gilson contends that creation seen from the light of the metaphysics of *esse* provides a two-way approach—one from God to creatures, but also from creatures to God:[48]

> We can say, then, that since God is 'being,' (*esse*), and every cause produces an effect similar to itself, the proper effect of God is the being of the creature. To create is indeed *producere esse rerum* (to produce the being of things); or conversely, since creatures are beings because they have being (*esse*), we can say, ascending from them to God, that in order to be their cause he himself must be the pure act of being: *ipsum purum esse*. As soon as we have grasped the Thomistic notion of *esse*, the two ways are nothing but the two directions of one and the same way.

This text here provides another example of Christian philosophy at work. While if God is the God of Subsistent Being Itself, *ipsum esse subsistens*, we have already established that creation is but the imparting of *esse* to creatures. But from the reverse order, if a creature is seen to be that which *has esse* but is not its *esse*, it can be argued conversely that it must be caused by that which *Is esse by essence*. Thus, the first path opens up to a second path, both rooted in the metaphysics of *esse*.

Furthermore, the very likeness of creatures to Creator is also rooted in the notion of the God of Being causing *esse* in creatures. As Gilson explains, "And indeed, since the proper name of God is He Who Is, and every cause produces an effect similar to itself, created being must resemble God first and foremost because it also is a being."[49] And this likeness of effect to cause is the basis of the notion of *participation*:[50]

> To participate and to be caused are one and the same thing. To say that created being is participated being is to say that it is the proper effect of the uncaused being, who is God. That is why St. Thomas so frequently moves, without articulating the movement, from the ideas of being-in-itself and the pure act of

[48] Gilson 1960: *Christian Philosophy*, 90-91.

[49] Ibid, 92.

[50] Ibid, 94.

> being to those of the cause of all being, of being caused, and of being by participation.

As God is Being Itself, he is by definition uncaused and thus also by definition not a being by participation. However, as creatures are by definition caused through the act by which they receive *esse*, in turn, this reception of *esse* is precisely what is meant to be *a being by participation*. Quoting at length from *De Potentia* 3, 5, Gilson affirms the link between the notion of the God of *Ipsum esse* and the notion of created/participated being:[51]

> Finally, we see clearly the bond uniting the notion of created or participated being to the Thomistic notion of God, the pure act of being. "For we must posit a being (*ens*) which is its very being (*ipsum suum esse*). The proof of this is that there must be a first being which is pure act and in which there is no composition. This unique being, then, must cause all other beings to exist, which are not their being but possess being by participation."

Note well, as an upshot of Gilson's treatment of this passage from the *De Potentia*—which again he is citing in a favorable manner not only to be St. Thomas' position but, as we maintain, to be his own—we find that in fact Gilson explicitly acknowledges the Thomistic doctrine of creation to be at least *de iure* attainable by unaided reason. As he explains favorably of St. Thomas' position on this point, "Those who ask if St. Thomas thought that creation is a notion accessible to natural reason alone will find the answer to their question here. And this, our theologian says, is the argument of Avicenna" (*Metaphysics* 8.7 and 9.4). He then concludes: 'Thus it is proved by reason and held on faith that everything is created by God.'"[52] Thus, an object of knowledge which is *de iure* capable of being grasped by unaided reason but which has also been either directly revealed or derived from the directly revealed is what we have called a *preamble of faith*. Nevertheless, given Gilson's emphasis on what he regards as the historical fact that the notion of God as *Ipsum esse* and of the related notion of *creatio ex nihilo*

[51] Ibid. Quoting from *De Potentia* 3, 5.

[52] Ibid. Continuing quotation from *De Potentia* 3, 5.

were prompted primarily by revelation, this suggests that some preambles are more obscure to the unaided intellect than others, and at least as matter of historical fact, that some have required more assistance to come to explicitly and with confidence than others.

Going back, then, to the notion of participation, this also maps on to the understanding of God's creative conservation and God's presence to that created being:[53]

> Thus the following propositions follow in sequence: God is his being; since every efficient cause produces its like, the proper act of Being is to cause being; caused being subsists only by the continuance of the creative action; created being is a participation in creative Being; finally, creative Being is present by its very essence to the created being that subsists only through it.

As caused being is participated being, *participated beings* are contingent beings deriving their existence from God not only at their beginning in time but for as long as they exist. Thus, God is present by essence to creatures by means of his creative, conservative power of giving *esse* to things. And this creative, conservative presence through his power is *directly and freely willed by God*. As rooted in an act which is ongoing and freely willed out of nothing, Gilson regards the metaphysics of *esse*, and the drama of creation which flows from that *perfect esse*, to be ultimately a metaphysics of love: "This metaphysics of being, moreover, is far from excluding a metaphysics of love, for why does God will nature and the human race except that he loves them?"[54] Though Gilson hints at this in his earlier *Le Thomisme* edition of 1927, a more explicit reflection upon the notion of God as *Ipsum esse* and the metaphysics occasioned by it suggest this truth all the more.

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[53] Gilson 1960: *Christian Philosophy*, 98.

[54] Ibid, 99.

3. Conclusion – A Christian Metaphysics of Creation in Two Modes

From the treatment of one of Gilson's earlier works (*Le Thomisme*, 3rd edition, 1927),[55] we saw Gilson present a Thomistic philosophy of creation. From the treatment of his slightly later *Gifford Lectures* of 1931-32,[56] we saw how Gilson regarded the revelation of the name of God to have occasioned the Christian understanding of God as *ipsum esse subsistens* as source and root not only of a Christian metaphysics, but also of a Christian philosophy of creation. Through an examination of his later *Christian Philosophy: An Introduction* (1960), we saw that Gilson regarded this Christian metaphysics occasioned by Christian revelation to be truly a metaphysics of *esse*, of the God whose essence is his *esse*, who creates by freely imparting *esse* to his creatures, remaining present to those creatures through his conserving power. In truth, Gilson's mature Christian philosophy of creation is thoroughly grounded in a metaphysics of love.

One question which still remains is this: if Christian revelation has occasioned a Christian metaphysics of *esse* and a Christian philosophy of creation as part of and flowing from it, according to Gilson's view, does one need to be a theologian—or is one necessarily a theologian—when engaging in such philosophical investigations? To this question, I will offer the following distinction for Gilson's understanding of Christian philosophy in general and *a fortiori* of any Christian metaphysics contained within it. In his philosophical memoire *Le Philosophe et la Theologie* (1960),[57] Gilson suggests that there are what I will call two *modes of Christian philosophy*. He explains Christian philosophy in this way: "… taken in its most comprehensive meaning, Christian philosophy transcends the distinction of scholastic philosophy and scholastic theology. It designates the use the Christian makes of the philosophical reason when, in either

[55] 1927: *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 1929.

[56] 1931-32: *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 1936.

[57] Étienne Gilson 1960: *Le Philosophe et la Theologie*, trans. Cecile Gilson as *The Philosopher and Theology* (Random House, 1962).

one of these two disciplines, he associates religious faith and philosophical reflection." [58] Thus, in one mode, *Christian philosophy* is that way of philosophizing at the service of and in the specific context of Christian theology which "associates religious faith and philosophical reflection." This would indeed include the philosophizing of the Christian theologian, a mode of Christian philosophy as *ancilla theologiae*.

However, Gilson makes clear that a second mode exists within philosophy proper—or scholastic philosophy in this case—as long as said philosopher also "associates faith and philosophical reflection." Thus, in this mode, the Christian philosopher as *amicus theologiae*, receives that same beneficent influence from revelation but endeavors to ground philosophically what he can and share with all seekers of truth. In this way, the reflection upon and development of a Christian metaphysics in the vein of Gilson's Christian philosophy of creation need not be regarded a closed house activity, but rather the kind of activity which has produced and can continue to produce further interdenominational and even non-denominational fruits.

While the reader of this essay will rightly see greater emphasis upon the theological context of Gilson's doctrine of creation, this is so because Gilson himself *qua historian* found this doctrine textually present within primarily theological works, though developed by the philosophizing theologians of the Middle Ages, St. Thomas being the Christian philosopher *par excellence* in this mode. Nevertheless, for Gilson the legitimacy of a Christian philosophy of creation worked out in the second mode, as say, a Maritain, Pegis, Owens, Knasas, or even a Wippel—just to name a few—should be affirmed insofar as these thinkers are Christian metaphysicians in the second mode of Christian philosophy when they philosophize *like the Scholastics*. But what does it mean, for Gilson, to philosophize like the Scholastics? In his 1951 essay "Historical Research and the Future of Scholasticism" Gilson famously caused controversy when he affirmed, "Our task today is to recapture the true spirit of medieval metaphysics, to grasp once more the genuine and profound meaning of its principles. I should add that

[58] Gilson 1960: *The Philosopher and Theology*, 198.

Scholasticism, covered over by more than five centuries of dust, is now experiencing its greatest evil—the ignorance of its own nature. To restore it to itself, let us listen to the counsel of history: Scholastic philosophy must return to theology!"[59]

What then does it mean for Gilson for Scholastic philosophy to "return to theology"? He answers this question with what he regards to be the blueprint for being a Christian philosopher, found in *Aeterni Patris*, 9: "The philosophy we call Scholastic is not distinguished from other philosophies by its essence; it is rather distinguished from them as the best way of philosophizing. That is indeed how the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* has described Scholastic philosophy, and with perfect reason: *Qui philosophiae studium cum obsequio fidei Christianae conjungunt, ii optime philosophantur*. To philosophize otherwise is assuredly to philosophize, but it is to philosophize less well. At any rate, it is no longer to philosophize as did the Scholastics."[60] Following Leo XIII, Gilson maintains that "They, who join the study of philosophy with obedience to Christian faith, philosophize best."[61] And this philosophizing under the obedience and guidance of Christian faith may be done in either mode of Christian philosophy, whether said Christian philosopher is a philosophizing theologian or a Christian metaphysician devoting himself to grounding the Thomistic doctrine of being as *esse* under the guidance of the Christian faith like a star protecting from error and providing encouragement to begin again when falling short, but also may be engaged in by any seeker of truth willing to follow the path of the Christian philosopher and plumb the mystery of being, following wherever the truth may lead.

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[59] Gilson 1951: "Historical Research and the Future of Scholasticism," *The Modern Schoolman*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1951): 1-10, reprinted in 1957: *A Gilson Reader,* ed. Anton Pegis, 165.

[60] Ibid (Pegis reprint), 166.

[61] Leo XIII 1879: *Aeterni Patris*, 9.

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