IRENAEUS OF LYONS

Eric Osborn's book presents a major study of Irenaeus (125–200), bishop of Lyons, who attacked Gnostic theosophy with positive ideas as well as negative critiques. Irenaeus' combination of argument and imagery, logic and aesthetic, was directed to a new document, the Christian bible. Dominated by a Socratic love of truth and a classical love of beauty he was a founder of Western humanism. Erasmus, who edited the first printed edition of Irenaeus, praised him for his freshness and vigour. He is today valued for his splendid aphorisms, his optimism, love of the created world, evolutionary view of history, theology of beauty, and humour. Why have two millennia of European culture been so creative? Irenaeus points to the sources: Greek ways of thinking and the Christian bible. Irenaeus' thought is complex, yet infinitely rewarding to the critical reader, and this full study of it will be of interest to theologians, historians of ideas, classicists, scientists and students.

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To
Sophie and Genevieve

Contents

Preface

In Irenaeus, Athens and Jerusalem meet at Patmos. The visions of the prophets, which point to Christ, take the place of Plato's forms and from them he proves the truth of the apostolic preaching. Here Irenaeus follows Justin but with wider vision, for he is the first writer to have a Christian bible before him. To this text he applies the classical criteria of logic (what is true) and aesthetics (what is fitting) to draw out his four concepts of divine Intellect, economy, recapitulation and participation. His two criteria, along with his exuberant images, present his reader first with a jungle and then with a clear synthesis. From one central point he moves through the universe of biblical imagery, rubbing argument and image together because each is necessary to the other.

Irenaeus is a difficult author because of conflict within a clear general structure. Loofs identified multiple sources and wished to prove incoherence. His analysis was reasonably rejected by Hitchcock and others. His general claim for multiple sources stands, but his procedure is regressive rather than progressive. An interpreter may note what a source meant in an earlier context, but his chief interest is what the author or compiler makes of anything he includes. A second objection to Irenaeus was more to the point: Koch alleged conceptual bankruptcy or a general lack of coherent ideas.

The first step out of the genuine despair, which every interpreter of Irenaeus knows, is a recognition of Irenaeus' criteria. Alongside his logical argument which pursues truth there is his perception of fitness. This governs the apparently ridiculous claim that there must be four Gospels because there are four winds and because living things are tetramorphous. With prophetic visions as the final

source of truth, aesthetic fitness governs exposition. Here the interpreter of Irenaeus needs a poet. I was fortunate to find Chris Wallace Crabbe's comic poem 'Why does a cauliflower so much resemble a brain?' and to discuss with him the way poetic association works. Prophetic imagery is born afresh in Irenaeus through poetic association. How argument and imagery fit together is an endless inquiry. Their presence as two criteria must be recognised in Irenaeus and the whole of Christian culture.

The other step for an interpreter is to identify the concepts, which govern his author's thought. For much of the twentieth century no one wrote a theology of Irenaeus. Many wrote on specific concepts of economy (divine plan) and recapitulation (summing-up of all things). These concepts do not explain, however, the immediacy of God whose glory is a living man. Following the useful rule that a thinker's ideas centre on the points where his interpreters disagree, the concept of participation emerged. Since participation is always participation of someone or something, the concept of the divine Intellect as the source of all goodness moved to the beginning of the analysis. Participation is only possible if God wills to share his goodness. The four concepts: divine Intellect, economy, recapitulation and participation govern the gospel, which Irenaeus declares. God and man are joined when God becomes what men are in order to bring them to be what he is. Economy and recapitulation join, as Irenaeus puts it, the end to the beginning, man to God. The four concepts are intelligible in succession: the divine Intellect plans the economy, which ends in recapitulation and the sharing of divine goodness. They must be kept together. The immediacy of God is known because God creates from nothing, never allows Adam to leave his hands, becomes man that man might share in God. If we ignore the first and last concepts (divine goodness and participation) we omit the point of the process, which is to join divine glory to human life. Economy and recapitulation lose point without their source (divine goodness) and end (participation).

To the logical exploration of these ideas Irenaeus adds his other criterion, an aesthetic of divine glory. The divine economy is a prolongation of God, which may be seen. Irenaeus is an empiricist whose vision of God is the source of life. This element of Irenaeus

has constituted his appeal to Christians over the centuries. It may be noted in contrast to a modern writer whose language reflects many of the ideas of Irenaeus. T. S. Eliot speaks, as does Irenaeus, of the moment in which past and future are conquered and reconciled, and of the crowned knot of fire in which all is brought to a good end. Yet Eliot writes with the hostility of an Absolute Idealist to empiricism which is the folly of old men. Irenaeus is close to Hopkins who sees God's glory in the world.

How do we use the four concepts and the two criteria to combat the accusation of confusion against Irenaeus? First, we must identify the vocabulary which Irenaeus uses to express his concepts. We must learn his language. Because Irenaeus is drawing on different sources, we must show that his opinions are not confined to one part of his work. Secondly, vocabulary takes meaning within argument. Therefore we must trace his arguments which are of three kinds. There is straight logical argument as in the refutation of Gnosticism in Book 2. There is the accumulated imagery of lists of prophecy which prove the truth of the apostolic preaching. Finally there is the composite argument of Irenaeus where the logic leap-frogs through scripture which is its guarantee of truth. This is exemplified in the two arguments, which end in love of enemies as the essence of recapitulation. These different kinds of argument are to be expected from the two criteria of logic and aesthetics.

One point of possible confusion may be clarified. I have hesitantly (because of probable misunderstanding) pointed to the presence of a Platonic paradigm in Irenaeus. He explicitly opposes Platonism on fundamental points: the status of forms and the material world, the meaning of history and the nature of man. Yet willy-nilly he thinks in the framework of his time and shares with the opposing Platonic underworld an intellectual machinery which makes controversy and new thought possible.

Remarkably, the chief influence of Gnosticism on Irenaeus was that it forced him to take Athens seriously. Gnosticism had to be met near Plato. Reasoned argument had to guide a barrage of texts. As a result Gnosticism (theosophy) stimulated its opposite (philosophy) and exegesis to produce Christian theology. Argument and imagery presented to inquirers a better use of the Socratic tradition. Gnostics were strong on picture and myth but weak on argument. When we

have seen this, we begin to understand the second century, that fertile period which formed Western thought.

Since my concern is to understand Irenaeus, his criteria and his concepts, I have taken the account of his Protean opponents at face value. By setting out the teachings to which he is opposed he has defined the indefinable Gnosticism in a way that seems no longer possible. Since the variety of groups called 'Gnostic' rivals the incoherence of contemporary Anglo-American Christianity, some scholars today challenge the usefulness of the term. Even the general assessment of Gnostics is uncertain. Once seen (by Irenaeus and Plotinus) as world-haters, many are now seen as world-lovers, who were concerned to lessen the tension between their religion and society. I have discussed these issues in an appendix; but they are marginal to my purpose. Fortunately, Irenaeus set out carefully the views, which he rejected; their importance for us is that they gave him a stimulus without which he might never have completed the first great synthesis of Christian thought. The exploration of that synthesis is my concern. His claim that the transcendence of divine love implies God's immediacy may be a rejection of the 'separate God' of Gnosticism; but it is much more besides. It is a profound interpretation of the Christian gospel.

Orbe's favoured epithet for Irenaeus was 'rich'. This prolixity has squeezed out many pages of secondary discussion and I cannot hope to indicate my debt to those who have written about him during the last two hundred years. What remains will demonstrate that Irenaeus not only said good things, but that he gave good reasons for saying these things. The general reader may bypass, on first reading, the multiplicity of references to the text, which the scholar needs in order to learn the language of Irenaeus, to prove that the four concepts are universal and to elucidate their meaning. Equally important is the analysis of argument, for it is here, not in the aphorisms, that the synthesis of Irenaeus is evident.

From conversations over the years with Jacques Fantino, E. P. Meijering and John Rist, each of whom read a first draft, and with Norbert Brox, Louis Doutreleau, Robert Grant, Christoph Markschies, Denis Minns, Antonio Orbe, Pierre Prigent, and Bernard Sesboüé, I have learnt more than I can say. The late André Benoit was my colleague in Strasbourg twenty years ago.

They all saw Irenaeus' richness of thought, imagery and humanity. I am profoundly grateful to them. John Behr and Bernard Sesboüé sent me, in advance, the proofs of their fine new books.

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Finally, my thanks go to Jan Chapman and Kevin Taylor of Cambridge University Press who thoughtfully and intelligently guided the manuscript into print.

The book is dedicated, with great affection, to my granddaughters, Sophie and Genevieve.

Abbreviations

ABR	*Australian Biblical Review*
AJPP	*Australasian Journal of Philosophy and Psychology*
AHAW.PH	Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften – Philosophisch-historische Klasse
ANCL	Ante-Nicene Christian Library
AThR	*Anglican Theological Review*
Aug	*Augustinianum*
BJRL	*Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*
BLE	*Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique*
ChH	*Church History*
CICL	Cahiers de l'institut catholique de Lyon
CNRS	Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
DK	H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (7th edn; Berlin, 1951–4)
DR	*Downside Review*
DS	*Dictionnaire de spiritualité*
DViv	*Dieu vivant*
EThL	*Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses*
EThSt	Erfurter Theologische Studien
EvQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
FZPhTh	*Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie*
GOTR	*Greek Orthodox Theological Review*
Greg	*Gregorianum*
H.E.	Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*
HTh	*History and Theory*
HThR	*Harvard Theological Review*
Irén	*Irénikon*

JThS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
KRS	G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic philosophers* (2nd edn; Cambridge, 1983)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LS	A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic philosophers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1987)
Miss	*Missionalia*
MThZ	*Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift*
Mus	*Muséon*
NAKG	*Nederlandsch archief voor kerkgeschiedenis*
NAWG.PH	Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen – Philologisch-historische Klasse
NedThT	*Nederlandsche Theologisch Tijdschrift*
NRTh	*Nouvelle revue théologique*
NT	*Novum Testamentum*
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
OrChrAn	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
PAS	*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*
PG	*Patrologia graeca* (Migne)
Ph	*Philologus*
Phron	*Phronesis*
REG	*Revue des études grecques*
RevBen	*Revue Benedictine*
RevSR	*Revue des sciences religieuses*
RFNS	*Revista di filosofia neo-scolastica*
RHPhR	*Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*
RSLR	*Revista di storia e letteratura religiosa*
RSPhTh	*Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*
RSR	*Recherches de science religieuse*
RThAM	*Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*
RThPh	*Revue de théologie et de philosophie*
RTR	*Reformed Theological Review*
SC	Sources chrétiennes
Schol	*Scholastik*
SecCent	*Second Century*
SJTh	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
StMiss	*Studia missionalia*

StTh	*Studia theologica*
StudAns	*Studia Anselmiana*
StudPatr	*Studia patristica*
SVF	*Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*
SVTQ	*St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*
ThH	Théologie historique
ThLZ	*Theologische Literaturzeitung*
ThQ	*Theologische Quartalschrift*
ThR	*Theologische Rundschau*
ThStK	*Theologische Studien und Kritiken*
Trad	*Traditio*
TRE	*Theologische Realenzyklopädie*
TS	*Theological Studies*
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
USQR	*Union Seminary Quarterly Review*
VigChr	*Vigiliae Christianae*
VetChr	*Vetera Christianorum*
ZAC	*Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum*
ZKG	*Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*
ZKTh	*Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZThK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

Titles of Greek patristic writings follow the abbreviations of G. W. H. Lampe, *A dictionary of patristic Greek* (Oxford, 1961).

REFERENCES TO IRENAEUS

(3.3.1) refers to *Against heresies*, Book 3, chapter 3, paragraph 1 (SC); (4 pref. 4) refers to *Against heresies*, Book 4, preface, paragraph 4; (*dem.* 20) refers to *Demonstration of the apostolic preaching*, section 20 (SC); (frag. 4) refers to fragment 4 in the edition of W. Harvey (Cambridge, 1857).