

W.C. van UNNIK

THEOLOGICAL SPECULATION AND ITS LIMITS

In an article published in 1949 and later reprinted in the collection of essays *After the New Testament*, Robert Grant showed that Irenaeus in his *Adversus haereses* (2.28.2) made use of a philosophical handbook very much like that of Aetius or Plutarch¹. Irenaeus himself makes no mention of his source. At first sight, it appears as though he sets down in a casual way a number of topics where human knowledge falls short; and the items listed appear to have little connection with each other. Irenaeus starts the list with the flooding of the Nile, continues with the migration of birds, the tides of the seas, *et al.*, and he ends with the differences between various metals and stones. Because the passage fits the context so well, the impression is left that the bishop invented the list himself. The only thing that makes a reader pause is the fact that the Nile comes first of all. What importance could that Egyptian river have had for an Asian living in Gaul? Readers as long ago as Feuardent in the sixteenth century had seen that some of these topics were controversial in antiquity². Grant was able to go farther and to establish beyond any doubt the fact that Irenaeus had made use of a doxography. And this fact, which can be corroborated by other observations pointing in the same direction³, throws an interesting light on the bishop's cultural heritage and his relation to the Greek intellectual tradition.

1. R. M. GRANT, "Irenaeus and Hellenistic Culture", *After the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1967) 158-164 (originally published in *Harvard Theological Review*, 1949).

2. F. FEUARDANT (1539-1610; see F. L. CROSS and E. A. LIVINGSTONE, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* 2, Oxford, 1974, 509) published his edition of Irenaeus in 1576; his notes were reprinted by A. STIEREN, *Sancti Irenaei... quae supersunt omnia* (Leipzig, 1853) 2. 823, who also mentions PLUTARCH, *De plac. phil.* 3, but only on one item. See also the note of GRABE (in Stieren, 2, 828).

3. Cf. H. DIELS, *Doxographi Graeci* (Berlin, 1958; reprint of the edition of 1879) 171, on Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 2.14.2; W. R. SCHOEDEL, "Philosophy and Rhetoric in the

Once he has set the passage of Irenaeus in the framework of scientific discussions on the points at issue in antiquity, Grant finds that Irenaeus' attitude is much like that of the Stoics who "avoid inquiring into causes because of their obscurity". This verdict, however, is not the last word, for he modified it by adding: "But Irenaeus inclines toward skepticism... With the skeptics he would say that there is no evident criterion of truth" (163-64). Three years later he returned to the subject in dealing with the role of doxographical manuals in education and remarks that "the obvious result of the study of such a compendium is complete scepticism... In any event, our earliest witnesses to its use employ it for sceptical purposes". Among these witnesses he finds the case of Irenaeus "perhaps the most interesting because of the sceptical conclusion he explicitly draws. He is stressing the complete adequacy of scripture and the impiety of looking for solutions of problems not given there. While he admits that there are problems in scripture itself, he argues that they are not greater than the insoluble difficulties in science"⁴.

Some seven years later William Schoedel took up the point again in an article on "Philosophy and Rhetoric in the *Adversus Haereses* of Irenaeus". He likewise demonstrated the bishop's use of a compendium and then concluded that Irenaeus "goes far beyond the Sceptics in using philosophical doubt as a device by which to recommend Biblical revelation" (24). Does that mean that Irenaeus was a companion and a forerunner of those Christian theologians who had God serve as the explanation of that which cannot be explained by human reason? Our German colleagues have a fine expression for the phenomenon: "Gott als Lückenbüsser" ("God as stand-in"). The history of scientific discoveries has revealed the dangers that beset this road, for the more knowledge expands, the more God is replaced as explanation. Is Irenaeus on that path? It may be, and if so, we may deplore it, but we cannot call him back. The question, however, is whether we can draw this inference from his handling of that doxographical handbook.

Before we discuss the question, it will be helpful to look at the words

Adversus Haereses of Irenaeus", *Vigiliae Christianae*, 13 (1959) 23-24; W. C. VAN UNNIK, "Two notes on Irenaeus", *Vigiliae Christianae*, 30 (1976) 208-209 on *Adv. haer.* 3.25.5.

4. R. M. GRANT, *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early-Christian Thought* (Amsterdam, 1952) 80.