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**THE TRANSCENDENCE AND FREEDOM OF GOD :
IRENÆUS, THE GREEK TRADITION AND GNOSTICISM**

Irenaeus of Lyons unquestionably falls into the category of early Christian writers whose thought has not been neglected. The texts of *Adversus haereses* and of the *Demonstratio* have been pored over with immense care. Scholars have turned to Irenaeus not merely for his historical interest, but also because there are certain aspects of his thought which seem to touch responsive chords in the minds of contemporary theologians. In consequence, there have been articles or monographs dealing, directly or indirectly, with many sides, and corners, of his teaching: his idea of history, his anthropology, his eucharistic theology (supposing, of course, that he had one in any but a Pickwickian sense of the term), his exegetical methods, his views about tradition, his place in the formation of the New Testament canon... and so on. Particular and special attention has been paid to the several aspects of his understanding of the person and work of Christ, and to his use of the idea of recapitulation.

There is nothing to complain about in all this. Irenaeus, after all, was in spite of, or perhaps because of, the broadness and frequent imprecision of his theological brush, the creator of an unusually influential theological synthesis: one which had the double advantage of being relatively clear in its outlines and at the same time fuzzy in its details, so that those who followed him could manage at once to be persuaded of his essential rightness, and to sit loose to his particular notions on any given subject. One might almost write the history of Christian thought in the late second and third centuries as a series of essays in the reconsideration and correction of Irenaeus, the man who, in ways which were alternately embarrassing and irritating to more learned and perceptive souls, had summed up the proportions and drift of ordinary (one hesita-

tes for various reasons to say “catholic”) Christianity in a time of crisis. And such being the case, it would be hard to complain about the amount of scholarly attention which has been accorded him.

On the other hand, there is perhaps ground for some complaint about the foci of scholarly attention to Irenaeus. It is a notorious problem for any sort of historical study that scholars tend to take their own interests and questions to their sources, and to notice in the sources whatever most nearly corresponds to their own agenda. So long as this procedure serves in the upshot to illuminate the object of their study, it affords no ground for captious criticism or for despair of the historian’s “objectivity”. Nevertheless, the very fact that it is habitually and inevitably employed provides reason for a constant questioning of the scope and focus of any historical inquiry. And in the case of Irenaeus there is at least one matter which seems to have been unduly neglected.

It seems apparent from literary-critical consideration of the *Adversus haereses*¹, that Irenaeus originally contemplated a work in two books. The first was to be his “detection”, and the second, his “refutation” of the “falsely-named ‘gnosis’”. The last three books thus represent something of an expansion of the work as originally contemplated. It is, therefore, a matter of some interest to determine what it was that Irenaeus set about doing in his initial and unexpanded effort to deal with his Ptolemaean Gnostic adversaries. What was the issue to which he turned immediately, as the central matter at stake in the controversy with Gnosticism?

The opening of the second Book makes the answer to this question quite clear. Having stated the purpose of the Book (to “overturn their entire system by taking up its principal topics” (*Adv. haer.* 2, praef.)), he turns immediately to what he describes as the “first and most central topic”. This turns out to be the question of “God the Demiurge, who made heaven and earth and everything in them” (*Adv. haer.* 2.1.1). There can be no doubt that in Irenaeus’ mind this question was indeed absolutely central. For one thing, he never tires, even when ostensibly occupied with other matters, of repeating what might plausibly be taken to be the central theme of his work: the thesis that God is one, and is himself the maker of everything that is. This theme recurs intermittently

1. See, for example, A. BENOIT, *Saint Irénée: Introduction à l’étude de sa théologie* (Paris, 1960), 155f.