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Showcasing Copleston and Lonergan

Gerald O'Collins SJ

Abstract

For twelve of the years during which he spent a semester lecturing as a visiting professor at the Gregorian University (Rome), Frederick Copleston enjoyed close contacts with Bernard Lonergan. He was one of the two 'house' censors of *Insight*. He also wrote a very positive review of the book for the Oxford-based *Journal of Theological Studies*, which was then co-edited by Henry Chadwick. The personal and professional contacts between Copleston and Lonergan have been widely neglected; they call for further study and evaluation.

Keywords

Copleston, Gregorian University, *Insight*, Lonergan, philosophy

An erudite and drily humorous convert to Catholicism, Frederick Copleston SJ (1907–94), was the son of a British officer in the Indian civil service and the nephew of two Anglican bishops. Before entering the Society of Jesus in 1930, he studied at St John's College, Oxford. After priestly ordination, he taught philosophy for thirty years at Heythrop College, situated in an estate twenty miles north of Oxford. As Heythrop Hall, it had been the property of the earls of Shrewsbury.

During the first semester of the academic year from 1952 to 1968, Copleston went south to lecture as a visiting professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Founded in 1551 by St Ignatius Loyola, the Gregorian had become one of the most significant centres of scholarship and religious formation in the Catholic Church. Its alumni include seventeen popes, hundreds of bishops and cardinals, nearly one hundred saints and blessed, and innumerable parish priests and women religious who have served the worldwide Church with their pastoral ministry.

The inspiring, intellectual tradition of the Gregorian included Christopher Clavius (1538–1612). He worked as a scientific adviser on the commission established by Pope Gregory XIII to reform the calendar. A friend of Galileo Galilei, he led Europe as a teacher of mathematics. Clavius's works in geometry became standard textbooks.

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Translated into Chinese by Matteo Ricci and Adam Schall, they introduced western mathematical and astronomical techniques into China.

Even before he arrived in Rome, Copleston had become dissatisfied with current histories of philosophy. He wrote a monumental nine-volume history of philosophy that was published between 1946 and 1975. It brought him worldwide acclaim.

For twelve of those years (1953 to 1965), his heart years in rethinking the story of philosophy as *philosophia perennis*, Copleston enjoyed a remarkable dialogue partner of his own age. They were the years when he taught alongside Bernard Lonergan (1904–84) at the Gregorian. They shared life and talk in the same Jesuit community, situated on the slopes of the Quirinal Hill and just three hundred yards from the noise and swirl of the Trevi Fountain.

Did Copleston and Lonergan swap ideas when pacing up and down on the flat roof of the Gregorian? An unrivalled view across Rome swings from St Peter on top of Emperor Trajan's column to the unique majesty of the cupola of St Peter's basilica, and then around to the right and St Paul standing since the sixteenth century on top of Emperor Marcus Aurelius's column. The apostle keeps watch as a sentry over the Italian houses of parliament. The view from the Gregorian generates vividly a sense of Catholicism blending the apostles' faith in Christ with Latin and Greek culture and constantly concerned with the public life of people.

Or did Copleston and Lonergan take longer walks together— slipping past the Trevi Fountain, climbing up the Spanish Steps, and heading down the avenues of trees that crowned the Pincian Hill? We lack answers to such specific questions. I should have asked when I came to know them both in later years.

What we do know is that when they met in Rome, Copleston had already begun to climb the heights of philosophy as a philosophical historian. The early volumes of his major achievement had already been published, the first appearing in 1946. What did Lonergan make of Copleston's work?

In a private communication, the late Robert Doran SJ, told me that Lonergan 'spoke very warmly about Fr Copleston on several occasions'. Doran also drew my attention to Lonergan citing Copleston not only in *Method in Theology* but also in volumes 13, 17, and 18 of *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan.*[1]

[1] B. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1972), pp. 92, 95; Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 13, R. M. Doran and J. D. Dadosky (eds) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), p. 68, n. 12, p. 103, n. 10; vol. 17, R. C. Croken and R. M. Doran (eds) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 188, n. 27, p. 427, n. 48; vol. 18, P. J. McShane (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 231.

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What Copleston made of Lonergan's thought went far beyond a single footnote in volume 9 of *History of Philosophy*, appearing in a discussion of the influence of Martin Heidegger in contemporary Thomism: 'The writings of B. Lonergan, the Canadian Thomist, seem to be free of Heideggerian influence'.[2] Prior to its publication, Copleston had read the typescript of what became the over-eight-hundred-page *Insight*: *A Study of Human Understanding* (London: Longmans,1957). In the preface to *Insight*, together with Frederick Crowe and André Godin (who founded the Institute of Psychology at the Gregorian), he is thanked by Lonergan. They 'kindly read the typescript and by their diversified knowledge, encouraging remarks, and limited criticisms permitted me to feel that I was not entirely wrong'.[3]

In the event almost fifty reviews of *Insight* were published: in *Mind*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and other professional and popular journals found on both sides of the Atlantic. Copleston was invited to write a review which appeared in the 1958 issue of *The Journal of Theological Studies* (pp. 202–04). At the time, this prestigious journal of Oxford University Press enjoyed Dr Henry Chadwick (1920–2008) as its co-editor. He was at Queens' College, Cambridge, well underway on a stellar career that would make him a regius professor of divinity and head of house (Christchurch and Peterhouse) at both Cambridge and Oxford.

In 1958 glittering prizes also lay ahead for Copleston and Lonergan. Copleston became a fellow of the British Academy in 1970 and ten years later delivered the Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen, published as *Religion and the One*: *Philosophies East and West* (New York: Crossroad,1982). He received numerous honorary doctorates from universities around the world. Lonergan, among other distinguished positions, was to be appointed a *peritus* at the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), a member of the first International Theological Commission, and the Stillman Professor of Catholic Studies at Harvard University (1971–72). Both Copleston (in 1977) and Lonergan (in 1970) received the Aquinas Medal from the American Catholic Philosophical Association.

In his review of *Insight*, Copleston began by calling it the 'impressive' work of 'a Thomist who teaches dogmatic theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome'. The book, so far from being 'a running commentary on the words of Aquinas', emerged from years of studying 'the inner dynamic' of his thought and reaching 'conclusions about the nature of mental activity and philosophical reflection'.

[2] F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy,* vol. 9 (London: Search Press, 1975), p. 268, n. 1.

[3] B. F. Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 3, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, F. E. Crowe and R, M, Doran (eds) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 9.

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Copleston respected Lonergan for opening his book with a study of the 'family likeness between the types of insight as exemplified in mathematics, in science, and on the level of common sense'. He found the 'first part of the book' a valuable 'search for insight into insight'. By 'organizing the insights of mathematicians, scientists and "men of common sense"', insight into insight also organized all our knowing. Hence the second part of the book took up 'insight as knowledge'. In technical terms, it put the case for 'a close relation between epistemology [theory of knowledge] and metaphysics [theory of fundamental reality]'—a view which was 'not fashionable' in the UK at that time but which Copleston, Lonergan, and, through his studies of the Fathers of the Church, Chadwick helped to change or at least modify.

Copleston valued Lonergan for his 'insight into the dynamic cognitional structure exemplified in all types of knowing'. The thought of Lonergan, he agreed, 'rises out of a contemporary context and is expressed in a modern idiom'. Yet it expressed 'that synthesizing activity which was characteristic of the great thirteenth-century theologians' (read Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure). *Insight* had helped meet the felt need for 'a unified view of the mutual relations between apparently antithetical forms of thought'.

The personal relationship between Copleston and Lonergan has been regularly ignored by those who evaluate their achievements.[4] By including Copleston's magisterial review of Lonergan's first masterpiece, *Insight*: *A Study of Human Understanding*, Henry Chadwick helped showcase them together in the pages of the outstanding *Journal of Theological Studies*.

In 1983, Copleston would join the inaugural editorial board for *Method*: *Journal of Lonergan Studies.* At the end of 1991, he left the board shortly before his death. An interest in and support for Lonergan's thought lasted an academic lifetime for Copleston.

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[4] See Henry Shea, 'Copleston, Frederick, SJ', *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Jesuits* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 203–04; Jacques Monet and Frederick Crowe, 'Bernard J. Lonergan', ibid., pp. 475–76.

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