



FREDERICK COPLESTON

## Frederick Charles Copleston 1907–1994

FREDERICK COPLESTON, known to all his friends as ‘Freddie’, was born in 1907 near Taunton. His father had entered the Indian Civil Service in 1873, and eventually became Chief Judge of the High Court in Rangoon. His first wife died in 1895, and in 1902 he married Margaret, daughter of Col. Charles Little. The couple decided to return to England, despite the fact that Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India, would have preferred Copleston to have stayed on as Viceroy of Burma. The family had lived for centuries in the West Country, and local reputation had it that they were there when the Conqueror arrived. It had strong roots in the Church of England: John Copleston was Provost of King’s College, Cambridge, from 1681 until his death in 1689; Edward Copleston was Provost of Oriel College Oxford, 1814–28, Dean of Chester, and, in 1828, Bishop of Llandaff and Dean of St Paul’s. Freddie’s uncle served as Bishop of Colombo and as Bishop of Calcutta and Metropolitan of India from 1902–12.

Freddie Copleston was educated at Marlborough College from 1920–5, and was a contemporary there of John Betjeman, Louis MacNeice and Anthony Blunt, though he thought of them as moving in much more intellectual circles than he did himself. Unlike Betjeman, Copleston enjoyed his time at Marlborough, though his decision towards the end of his time there to become a Catholic was strongly disapproved of by the school authorities. His conversion was almost unintelligible to his family, a rejection of centuries of family tradition and service in the Church of England in favour of a Church which

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seemed irreducibly 'foreign' and alien. By his own account, he spent his first two years at St John's, Oxford, in acclimatising himself to his new religious surroundings and in rowing for the rather undistinguished College second eight, rather than devoting much energy to the study of Classical Moderations, in which he obtained a disappointing Third. He decided, to his father's delight, to work harder at Greats and graduated, to his relief, with a good Second in 1929.

Though J. D. Mabbott was his philosophy tutor, and he attended lectures on ethics by W. D. Ross, neither man seems to have had much influence on his philosophical views, nor was he impressed by any of the newer trends in philosophy at the time. Instead, he was much more taken by the somewhat old-fashioned neo-Hegelianism of some of the lecturers, and by the view that the task of philosophy was to provide an integrated world-view, a higher wisdom. He recalled that some of his friends at the time thought this hankering after philosophical enlightenment consorted ill with the ardent Catholicism of the recent convert. He himself preferred to see philosophy and theology as complementary disciplines, each endeavouring to give some ultimate account, however inadequately and tentatively, of the human condition. His early fascination with the more all-embracing kind of metaphysics never wholly left him, though it was much modified in later years.

On leaving Oxford, he applied to join the Diocese of Clifton, since the family home near Taunton lay in that diocese, and to study for the priesthood. After a year's study at the seminary in Oscott on the outskirts of Birmingham, however, he decided instead to become a member of the Society of Jesus, perhaps because he had admired some of the Jesuits whom he had met during his years at Oxford. So he became a Jesuit in 1930, spending two years in their novitiate in Roehampton, and then moving to their main house of studies at Heythrop, a village about twenty miles or so north of Oxford. Here, he spent two years studying philosophy, and four more studying theology, in the course of which he was ordained. That in those days the lectures and examinations were conducted entirely in Latin would not have caused him any great difficulty; less familiar would have been the scholastic philosophy, the content of which was to a considerable extent dictated by the need to provide a suitable foundation for the study of theology. It would not be surprising if, in contrast to his philosophy at Oxford, he had found his Jesuit studies somewhat overschematised and ahistorical in approach, despite the fact that they did aim at offering a coherent and integrated body of beliefs. There was

little attempt made in those days to give the students any serious first-hand acquaintance with the classical philosophers, or to present them as worth serious study for their own sakes. Whatever his private feelings on such issues, Copleston evidently impressed his Jesuit teachers, who at an early stage encouraged him to think of further studies, with a view to himself becoming a lecturer in philosophy.

He spent the year 1938–9 in Germany to complete his Jesuit training, and only just managed to get back to Britain before the outbreak of war. The war put paid to the original plan, that he should take a Doctorate in Philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome. Instead, he was asked to return to Heythrop and teach history of philosophy to the few young Jesuits who still remained there. His first book, published in 1942, was a monograph on Nietzsche, written as a serious, if critical, study of his philosophical views, and as an antidote to the perception that Nietzsche was simply a proto-Nazi. This led to a further book on Schopenhauer which appeared in 1946. His interest in both philosophers was doubtless stimulated by the atmosphere in Germany in those months just before the war, and the fact that there was little teaching to be done at Heythrop (though there were occasions in which he and others were pressed into digging for victory on the farm) gave him ample time for writing.

It was at this time that he began what was to be the major work of his life, his nine-volume work, *A History of Philosophy*. The project was initially much less ambitious. He intended no more than to write three volumes, covering ancient, medieval, and modern philosophy, and to do so in a way which was accessible to seminarians, and especially his Jesuit students. These, though they had to study philosophy as part of their training, could not be presumed to have any great aptitude, or indeed interest, in the subject. He deliberately set out to offer a clear elementary text-book which at least would not suffer from the shortcomings of the books currently in use. In particular, he wanted to make it possible for students to learn to appreciate a whole range of philosophers who differed widely in their views, and in their attitudes to religion and theology. One of his deepest convictions was that one has no right to disagree with any philosopher unless and until one has first gained a sympathetic understanding of what that philosopher said and why. He was never one to be overtly, still less militantly, critical of his colleagues and their work; but it is hard not to see in the motives behind the *History* a potentially wide-ranging criticism of what he took

to be the lack of breadth and intellectual challenge in Jesuit studies at that time.

The project soon outgrew the original plan. He found it impossible to give an adequate treatment within the three volumes he had originally envisaged, and he also found out that it was being used in universities, not just in seminaries. So the treatment in the later volumes became gradually more detailed and less elementary in character, though he still took great pains to make it accessible to undergraduates. The ninth and final volume appeared in 1975. A projected tenth volume, on Russian philosophy, in fact appeared separately in 1986 as *Philosophy in Russia: From Herzen to Berdyaev*, to be followed later by *Russian Religious Philosophy: Selected Aspects* in 1988. By and large, he remained pleased with the *History*. But he thought that the first volume, on ancient philosophy, had rapidly become out of date, and was in fact 'deplorable', though he never found time to do the radical re-write he saw to be required. The two books on Russian philosophy he also thought were very incomplete, though, since there was little in English for them to compete with, he thought they were at least better than nothing. He did once remark that the problem with Russian philosophy was that the really interesting philosophers were not Russian, and the really interesting Russians were not philosophers.

The *History*, despite its occasional unevenness, was and remains a monumental achievement. Its accuracy and balance are a model of interpretative skill, and the clarity of presentation makes it easily readable by students. Copleston sees the historian's task largely as one of exposition. On the whole, he does not write from any particular point of view, preferring instead to expound the views of the various philosophers in their own terms, and in relation to the controversies in which they were engaged, rather than to offer criticisms or assessments of them as seen through modern eyes, or against the background of the philosophical disputes of our own day. The dispassionate writing does not make for any great liveliness of style; but it has the inestimable merit of letting the writers speak for themselves, with absolutely minimal interference from the historian. Copleston aimed at clarity, reliability, and lack of bias, rather than intellectual 'bite'. He was on the whole delighted with a remark, made to me by one of my own teachers at the University of Michigan, that the publication of the *History* was really rather regrettable, since it made it rather hard to distinguish the examination papers of those graduate students who had struggled with

the original texts from those written by students who had done no more than carefully read their Copleston.

During the nearly thirty years over which the *History* appeared, Copleston's other commitments increased very rapidly. That he managed to produce the nine volumes with such regularity is, obviously enough, a tribute to the discipline with which he worked. But he also had the priceless ability to work in exceedingly short spells if occasion demanded. Once he had read the primary sources and thought about them, he seemed to be able to remember exactly where everything was to be found, and to be able to write another paragraph or two in the brief gap between, say, a lecture and a tutorial, or a tutorial and lunch. If lesser mortals, who needed much longer stretches of prime time to do any serious writing, complained of this fact and asked him how he managed, he used to say, rather self-deprecatingly, that the reason was that they were trying to do something original, whereas all he was writing was a mere history.

For ten years and more, beginning in 1952, Copleston was asked to spend half of each year lecturing in the Gregorian University in Rome. He did not find this altogether congenial; both the style and the approach were all too reminiscent of Heythrop in the thirties, and the history of philosophy was something of a Cinderella in the syllabus. Lectures were in Latin, and he used to recall somewhat wryly his efforts to conduct a graduate seminar on Wittgenstein in that language, 'as if it would not have been difficult enough in English or in German!' Lectures on behalf of the British Council in various cities in Italy, as well as earlier lectures given to various audiences in Europe on behalf of the Foreign Office, provided a welcome breath of fresh air. At this time, too, he broadcast on radio, and later on television, starting with his famous, if rather inconclusive debate with Bertrand Russell on the radio in 1948, and a lively discussion of the merits of logical positivism with Freddie Ayer in 1949. Copleston was almost completely out of sympathy with logical positivism in general (though he confessed to having somewhat more sympathy with emotivist theories in ethics), and with what he regarded as the trivialities of the 'ordinary language' approach to philosophy common at Oxford in the fifties. He resented the implication that to make an attempt to defend a more metaphysically ambitious view was implicitly to espouse some totalitarian position, whether political, or (even worse) religious, in which one over-arching cosmic system was to be imposed on everyone. He was more in tune with some aspects of continental philosophy, especially the writings of Maurice

Blondel and Karl Jaspers. His views at this time can perhaps best be seen in his set of essays, *Contemporary Philosophy*, published in 1956. In later years, when logical positivism and the more precious brands of ordinary language philosophy had become less fashionable, he himself had become less optimistic about the prospects of establishing one grand metaphysical synthesis. So in the seventies he found it easier to be more sympathetic to analytic philosophy, and to the view that philosophy was not so much a body of truth, as an analytical and questioning skill which could be applied to many other disciplines, such as science, or theology, or politics. Still, the hankering after the grand truth, born in his early Oxford days, never entirely left him. His Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen in 1979–80, published as *Religion and the One* were a sustained effort, more personal than anything in his *History*, to express something of this constant theme in his thinking, though, as he remarked, ‘large doses of metaphysics like that certainly don’t boost one’s sales.’

At the same time, he was also sensitive to the fact that the very conception of philosophy, and of what philosophers should be trying to do, varies from culture to culture. On the many visits which he made, to Russia, Honolulu, Eastern Europe, Rome and the United States, and from his attempts to come to grips with the diversity of opinions discussed in his *History*, he had collected large amounts of material on this topic. He had at one time hoped to round off his *History* with some account of the relationships between philosophy and culture, and perhaps even with some outline of the culture-transcendent patterns of philosophical thinking. But he came to despair of putting any order into the material he had collected, and to feel that the most that might emerge from such a study would be some airy generalisations based on inadequate empirical evidence. Some of the material he had collected, and some of his reflections on its significance, eventually emerged in a series of lectures he gave in Oxford in 1978, which were published as *Philosophies and Cultures* two years later.

Neither of these two works of his early retirement could remotely be described as typical of the then current fashions in British or American analytic philosophy. Both in subject matter and in content they have a somewhat archaic flavour. Though his history has been widely and deservedly acclaimed, his other works have never really been required reading for most philosophy students in the English-speaking world. The themes are too large, and the treatment almost completely avoids the technical devices which are the ordinary stock in trade of most

practising philosophers. Professor David Hamlyn once offered me the opinion that most contemporary philosophers working on Aristotle were either 'woods men or trees men.' The remark is of more general application, and Copleston was undoubtedly a woods man, with little patience for the painstaking analysis of the scene, tree by repetitive tree. Doubtless both approaches have their protagonists and their advantages. Copleston had an excellent eye for picking out the larger issues at stake in philosophy, and for putting them in a way which is urbane, clear, and yet pointed enough to make the reader stop and think again. He would certainly have settled for that.

The chronicle of his life and works gives a very partial picture of Freddie Copleston as his friends and colleagues knew him. He was surprisingly diffident in manner, wearing his learning lightly, and parading his reputation not at all. For all that he was in such worldwide demand as a lecturer, he was not a particularly lively or dynamic speaker, and the listener had to be quick to catch the many humorous or ironic undertones to what he was saying. Indeed, both in public and in private conversation his style was deliberately understated, the deflation of other people's pretentiousness or quirks hinted at, but never amounting to a direct attack. But if his lectures were hardly spectacular performances, he was a much loved teacher, most of all because his attitude to his students, or indeed towards his younger colleagues, was one of constant respect and encouragement, criticisms coming as gentle suggestions, advice as tentative questions. There was never even the hint of that occupational hazard of philosophers, the desire to display one's own dialectical skills by the demolition of others.

When, in 1970, Heythrop College in Oxfordshire, where he had taught for thirty years, was refounded as a College of the University of London with Copleston as its first Principal, he must have had mixed reactions. On the one hand, he unreservedly welcomed the integration of faculty and students into the normal university life of the country, and he enjoyed the much wider range of students who over the years came to study there. On the other hand, academic administration, and especially the problems involved in establishing the character and *modus operandi* of the fledgling College, were tasks which he neither relished nor was particularly good at. There were those who felt that he was so keen to prove that the College was simply part of the University like any other that he was in danger of abandoning its own distinctive history and a tradition of scholarship which went back to 1614. He, for his part, was clear that the College by Charter was not, and must not



appear to be, simply a transplanted Jesuit seminary. But he found such differences of emphasis and opinion trying, and certainly yearned for the quieter life of research and writing which had been his for so long. Still, he stuck to the ungrateful task of chairing committees, and learning the arcane procedures of Senate House, Boards of Studies, and Boards of Examiners, with unselfish dedication and considerable good humour. There were lighter moments, as when a Japanese professor of uncertain provenance appeared, asking for a lectureship, and claiming to have translated some of Copleston's works into Japanese. Unfortunately, the professor did not have sufficient English to make it clear which were the works he had translated. Or when he returned triumphant at having obtained a pair of trousers very cheaply from some barrow in Soho: 'You can't go wrong for two pounds!' He then sat down to have a cup of tea, to the accompaniment of a loud rending sound, and had to beat a hasty retreat backwards from the room with his new trousers all but severed into two separate halves. Copleston was honoured when the University conferred a personal professorship upon him in 1972, but was on the whole very happy when he reached retirement age in 1974, and could return to private life, as it were.

Several of the academic honours which were conferred on him came as complete surprises, all the more delightful for that reason. He was astonished to be invited to let his name go forward for election to the British Academy in 1970, and deeply moved by being made an Honorary Fellow of St John's College, Oxford in 1975, which he supposed must have been an expression of approval of the fact that he had made good in later years after an undistinguished performance there as an undergraduate. During the few years he lived in Oxford after his retirement, he often attended college Chapel there on Sundays, and dined afterwards in hall. Several American universities gave him honorary Doctorates, including Santa Clara University in California where he did quite a lot of teaching after retiring from London, and where he kept a wardrobe of tropical shirts and shorts which he felt would not have gone down too well in Britain. In 1983 he was even more surprised at being given a Doctorate by the University of Uppsala, especially since the doctorate was in theology. Though at the time he was not in the best of health, he rose to the occasion, donned a top hat and frock coat, and was highly amused at being welcomed by an orchestra and several salvos from the Swedish Army. Towards the end of his life he was especially pleased to be made a Doctor of Letters by the University of St Andrews.

Despite these honours, he always managed to take himself less than totally seriously. He enjoyed recounting an occasion when he and Freddie Ayer turned up to film a TV broadcast, only to find that the camera crew was having technical problems. They were plied with a succession of gin and tonics by the producer, and both of them were in extremely good spirits by the time the recording eventually began. Neither of them could really remember what they actually said, though they felt that early on in the proceedings they had totally forgotten the need to make their remarks accessible to a general audience, and simply enjoyed knocking spots off one another. Freddie Copleston said afterwards that he hoped they had talked about *The Self*, which was what the broadcast was supposed to be about; but he was none too sure that they had. I myself remember a long conversation between the two Freddie's after a Guest Night dinner, on what belief in God actually required of someone. In the end, they had apparently reached an agreement; except that each claimed that what they had agreed amounted to the other having converted. Whatever their differences of philosophical opinion, the two men remained very good friends over many years until Ayer's death.

Copleston enjoyed poking fun at religion. At the time when some people in Ireland were claiming that statues of the Madonna could, if one looked at them for long enough, be seen to move, Freddie said that he was not in the least surprised at that, since he had himself the same impression at times about the more elderly members of his own Jesuit Community. He also said that he had eventually given up writing on religious topics, not because he was afraid of being heretical, but because he was afraid of being tautological. Mostly, however, Freddie was reticent about his own personal religious beliefs, as he was about his personal life more generally. He came across as a very devout man, devoting considerable parts of his life to prayer, but in the most undemonstrative possible way. He was unfailingly kind, and his ironic humour was a constant source of pleasure to those who lived with him. But he would have resisted any attempt at a reductionist account of religious belief to a mere moral code of kindness and forgivingness. He was in general sympathetic to the view that human beings can be much clearer that there is a God than they can expect to be in the more detailed descriptions of God or of God's dealings with the world. And, though he was and always remained a committed Catholic and Jesuit priest, he certainly believed that any set of doctrinal formulations could at best be regarded as inadequate human attempts to

conceptualise a God who is ultimately mysterious and beyond our adequate grasp. He once said that, in whatever he had written, he hoped that he 'had left the Catholic faith more or less where it was.' He had found no better terms in which to speak of God, no better community in which to live and worship; but he certainly did not believe that the whole truth about the human condition had been once and for all encapsulated in any one theology, or philosophy.

Freddie had suffered from cancer for several years before his death. Treatment had minimised the pain, and his illness was something of which he made light, and which did not seem to impair his good humour or his energies. He had made a list of all the parks in the London A-Z Guide, and he had a project of going for walks to visit them all; he had managed to walk round most of them, perhaps even all of them, before he died, peacefully and quickly in February 1994. He was a simple man, a dedicated scholar, whose intellectual honesty, humility and personal kindness will be fondly remembered.

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