

than a dumb beast. The majestic Buddha is a dog in the dust; and what was it the servant song said—‘A worm and no man’? Evening falls, the sparrows chatter in the leaves, the green grapes swell in the warm air, the roses hem me in, a baroque glory. What now?

I must return, a dunce to a harsh master, a grown man to the womb of his mother; return, dust to dust. The still point of the turning world. Consider the lilies of the field. Take up your cross.

## On Dogmas and World-Views<sup>1</sup> by Hugo Meynell

I want to present a difficulty, and to commend a solution to that difficulty. The difficulty is one which frequently troubles Catholics and (to a lesser extent) other Christians; the solution to it is neither original nor new, but I think deserves wider publicity than it has had up to the present time.

The difficulty is as follows. Catholic Christians, and also many Christians of Protestant or Eastern communions, hold that the assent of believers is demanded to some doctrines, like those of the Trinity and of the divinity of Jesus Christ, which have been solemnly defined by the Church in the past. Now the definitions are couched in terms derived from earlier philosophical world-views. So, if we assent to the doctrines, it seems that we are thereby committed to the world-views which provided the terms in which they were defined.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that the believer is faced with the following dilemma: to reject the world-views as outmoded and therefore to reject the doctrines; or to accept the doctrines and with them the world-views. No Catholic can really accept either alternative; to accept the second is to be stuck for ever in the conceptual scheme of the ancient world, while to accept the first is, logically, to cease to be a Catholic. ‘Conservatives’ in the Catholic Church tend to emphasize the importance of maintaining the doctrines, and divert attention from the apparent consequence that the outdated world-views must also be retained. ‘Progressives’ tend to emphasize the im-

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Fr Fergus Kerr, O.P., for his comments on an early draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup>As Whitehead put it, ‘you cannot claim absolute finality for a dogma without claiming a commensurate finality for the sphere of thought within which it arose. If the dogmas of the Christian Church from the second to the sixth centuries express *finally and sufficiently* [my italics] the truths concerning the topics about which they deal, then the Greek philosophy of that period had developed a system of ideas of equal finality’ (*Religion in the Making*, C.U.P., 1926, p. 130). More recently, Leslie Dewart has stated roundly that ‘no Christian today (unless he can abstract himself from contemporary experience) . . . can intelligently believe that in the one hypostasis of Jesus two real natures are united’ (*The Future of Belief*, London, 1966, p. 150).

portance of dispensing with the world-views, and to gloss over the problem of in what sense, if any, one can consistently at once maintain the doctrine and abandon the world-view. To raise this question at all is to invite the stigma of conservatism at the hands of progressives, of progressivism at the hands of conservatives. But, even in theological matters, it is not wholly impossible to hold that truth is independent of and more important than fashion.

Let us jump in at the deep end, and face the fact that the notoriously unbiblical term *homoousios* was used in the classical formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, and survives, in the form of its Latin equivalent 'consubstantial', in the Creed still recited by millions of Christians every Sunday. This is only one of many instances which appear to verify the judgment that Greek philosophy supplied all the principal elements in which we have for centuries conceptualized the basic Christian beliefs of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The crucial question is to what extent, and in what way, the sources of Christian doctrine in Scripture, and the expression of that doctrine in the piety of ordinary believers, have been twisted and corrupted by Greek metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> In trying to answer this question, I shall be reproducing as faithfully as I can the views of Fr Bernard Lonergan, who seems to me to have answered it once and for all<sup>2</sup>.

It is certainly true that there are close affinities between some aspects of Greek philosophy and some early ecclesiastical authors. The Stoic doctrine that only bodies are real seems to lie at the basis of Tertullian's account of the divinity of the Son in *Adversus Praxean*; and Origen's account of the Son in *De Principiis* and *In Joannem* is clearly influenced by that collection of philosophical notions which is usually known as Middle Platonism. But the subordinationist tendency of these two writers was rejected along with Arianism at the Council of Nicaea. The term used to convey that rejection was *homoousios*. (It is worth noting that the term was objected to as unbiblical even at the time; but in the long run it was decided that the objection was not material.<sup>3</sup> Now according to G. Prestige<sup>4</sup> the term *homoousios* meant only one thing up to the time of the Council of Nicaea, 'of one (kind of) stuff'. As used by the Fathers of the Council, it was a metaphor drawn from material objects. 'The Fathers at Nicaea, then, did not find ready to hand a sharply

<sup>1</sup>That it has been so adversely affected, even in the classical doctrinal formulations, has been alleged by such profound theologians as Paul Tillich and William Temple. A significant, and very surprising, dissenting voice is that of Karl Barth, whose attitude on this matter I shall mention briefly below.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. especially *The Dehellenization of Dogma*, Theological Studies, June 1967; to which subsequent references will be unless otherwise assigned. Fr Lonergan's theory of the nature of dogmatic statements is exhaustively set out in his treatises *De Deo Trino* and *De Verbo Incarnato*.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. E. R. Hardie, Introduction to *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Library of Christian Classics, Vol. III), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>*God in Patristic Thought*, p. 209.

defined, immutable concept which they made into a vehicle for the Christian message; on the contrary, they found a word which they employed in a metaphorical sense.<sup>1</sup> (One might comment that crude metaphors, just because they are crude, are least liable to cause confusion in that few people are likely to take them literally. What they lack in imaginative fruitfulness they make up in precision, since the associations of their previous use can be dismissed as obviously irrelevant to their understanding in the new context; and it was precision which was needed at this particular juncture in the history of thought.)

Now the intellectual miracle achieved by the Greeks, for which all subsequent men have been in their debt, was to wean thought away from the primitive level by making abstraction possible. This miracle was brought about by the framing of second-order propositions, which mediated first-order propositions in the same kind of way that first-order propositions mediate non-propositional reality.<sup>2</sup> The infant who learns to talk leaves the world of undifferentiated experience and enters the world of meaningful discourse. The student must go one stage further; he must appropriate for himself the Greek achievement, and learn to reflect on the discourse the ability to engage in which he acquired as an infant. (He has already learned to talk about things; now he must learn to talk about talk.) This reflection on discourse leads the student to engage in the study of such matters as grammar, logic, hermeneutics and even possibly metaphysics. 'The basic purpose of this further learning is to control the affect-laden images that even in the twentieth century have the power to make myth seem convincing and magic seem efficacious.' (We are not prevented by it from having enthusiasms; but we are enabled to distance ourselves from our emotions sufficiently to ensure that they are properly directed.) But this second differentiation, this achievement of the power of second-order reflection, is onerous, the more so when universal education extends to many what had previously to be endured only by a few.<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely this second-order reflection on first-order propositions which is at stake in the use of such terms as *homoousios* in dogmatic theology. I have said that the Fathers of Nicaea deliberately used the term *homoousios* metaphorically.<sup>4</sup> What literal sense did they intend it to convey? The meaning signified by the metaphor, says Fr Lonergan, 'was determined not by some Hellenic concept but by a Hellenic technique. What *homoousios* meant exactly, was formulated by Athanasius thus: *eadem de Filio quae de Patre dicuntur, excepto Patris nomine*. The same meaning has been

<sup>1</sup>344.<sup>2</sup>342.<sup>3</sup>343.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. E. R. Hardie, *op. cit.*, p. 17: 'The history of theology can be written in large part by the explanation of a series of technical terms, the understanding, misunderstanding, and final definition of which make up the development of doctrine.' This attitude to the history of doctrine is identical with Fr Lonergan's.

expressed in the Trinitarian Preface: *Quod enim de tua gloria, revelante te, credimus, hoc de Filio tuo, hoc de Spiritu Sancto, sine differentia discretionis sentimus.* Now such a determination of meaning is characteristically Hellenic. It is a matter of reflecting on propositions. It explains the word "consubstantial" by a second-level proposition to the effect that the Son is consubstantial with the Father if and only if what is true of the Father also is true of the Son, except that only the Father is Father.<sup>1</sup> The dogma, so far from imposing a closed system of concepts on the believer, offers him what is referred to in modern philosophical jargon as an 'open structure'. He is left free by it to conceive of the Father in patristic, Scriptural, medieval, or contemporary terms—provided only that he assigns the same predicates to the Son as to the Father. The technique illustrated by the dogma is far from outworn in modern times, unless indeed science and mathematics, which depend upon the exercise of this technique, are outworn as well. 'The modern mathematician reflects on his axioms and pronounces them to be the implicit definitions of his basic terms. This technique, then, pertains not to the limitations of Hellenism antiquated by modern culture but to the achievements of Hellenism which still survive in modern culture and, indeed, form part of it.' Now, the psychologist Piaget tells us that children can only begin to engage in reflection on propositions at about the age of twelve; and very many, through lack of education or latent ability, never reach this stage at all. It follows that, if you want to put over the real implications of the doctrine defined at Nicaea to minds at such a lower stage of intellectual development, you need other means than those described.<sup>2</sup> (For instance, since only God confers grace, and only God ought to be worshipped, to worship Jesus Christ or to ask him to confer grace upon one is blasphemous unless he is indeed what Athanasius meant by 'of one substance' with the Father. So to say that Jesus Christ is to be worshipped, and that he confers grace, while insisting that only God is to be worshipped and can confer grace, would be a way of putting over to a mind at a lower stage of development what was intended by the Nicene decree.)

What applies to the concept 'substance' in this context applies also to the concept 'person'. (Briefly, you cannot acknowledge the doctrine of the Trinity at all without acknowledging that God is at once three and one; 'person' is merely the technical label for whatever there are three of in him, 'substance' for what there is one of; no more than this is implied in the use of these terms.) Now Dewart will have it that 'person' is a concept taken over from Hellenic thought, and one which we must improve on now that

<sup>1</sup>344-5. The dogma expressed by the formula is thus implicit in the New Testament so far as 'God', 'Jesus Christ' and 'the Spirit', or other terms with the same references, are used in a more or less interchangeable way. To exaggerate the 'more' is to confound the persons; to exaggerate the 'less' to divide the substance.

<sup>2</sup>346.

modern culture has out-grown Hellenism. But in the writings of, say, St Augustine, 'person' 'was an undefined, heuristic concept . . . what there are three of in the Trinity. . . . Such an account of the notion of "person" . . . directs future development but . . . cannot be said to impede it. The only manner in which it could be outworn would be the rejection of the Trinity; for so long as the Trinity is acknowledged, there are acknowledged three of something.' Just *what* there are three of in the Trinity is left quite open to later speculation, which has in fact developed in various directions.<sup>1</sup>

What it all comes to is that you cannot reject the Hellenic *technique* without rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity; and if to depend on this technique is disreputable, then *ipso facto* the whole of modern science is disreputable. Rejecting Hellenic *concepts* may indeed be demanded of us, situated as we are at quite a different point in the development of language and culture from the ancient Greeks; but there are clear signs that, so far as this is so, the doctrine of the Trinity does not depend upon Hellenic concepts at all. A doctrine which takes the form, as does the doctrine of the Trinity, of a proposition about propositions, *must* be Hellenic in a sense by the very fact that it is what it is; but the first-order propositions governed by it, be they about God or sulphur or pi-mesons, need not have anything Hellenic about them at all. Whatever may have been the case with some of his contemporaries, Athanasius himself seems to have been quite clear as to what was going on. In the *Tomus ad Antiochenos* we read the account of how Athanasius reconciled those that argued for one *hypostasis* with those that argued for three. 'He asked the former if they agreed with Sabellius, and the latter if they were tritheists; both groups were astounded by the question put to them, promptly disclaimed respectively Sabellianism and tritheism, and stopped their now obviously verbal dispute.'<sup>2</sup> (The point of the locution 'one substance' is no more and no less than that it stops you being a tritheist in making any distinction between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the point of 'three persons' is no more and no less than that it stops you being a Sabellian in acknowledging their oneness. The two locutions together stop you from either 'confounding the persons' (Sabellianism) or 'dividing the substance' (tritheism).)

The same observations and caveats apply in the case of patristic Christology. In the confusing talk about 'one nature' and 'two natures' in Christ—where, as has often been pointed out, you can pick out clear verbal contradiction between the formulations of the crucial documents—it may be asked what kind of dependence is implied on the Greek concept or concepts of 'nature'. Now Aristotle's concept of nature (to take a presumably representative 'Greek' example) is ambiguous in itself, and turns out not to be relevant in any case; the early Christian authors used the term quite dif-

<sup>1</sup>346.<sup>2</sup>346-7.

ferently. 'They . . . had their own ambiguous usage, and it was recognized solemnly and explicitly in the sixth and seventh centuries. In successive canons Constantinople II explained the correct meaning both of Chalcedon's two natures and Cyril's one nature'.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the verbal contradiction involved in saying that Christ has 'one nature' and 'two natures' is not a real contradiction, since 'nature' means something different in each case. Christ has one nature in that he is one individual; he has two natures in that he is both God and man, one to whom two ranges of predicates, divine and human, can be correctly applied. To take a parallel example: Elizabeth of Windsor is *one* individual who is *both* a woman *and* monarch of Great Britain; everything is true of her which is entailed as being true of X by the propositions 'X is a woman' and 'X is monarch of Britain'. She has *one nature* in that there is but one individual who is female monarch of Britain; but she has *two natures* in that she is *both* a woman *and* monarch of Britain. No more real contradiction is thus involved in the verbal contradiction alluded to in the case of Patristic Christology than there is in the case of talk about one human individual who is both a woman and monarch of Britain. Now Dewart, with very many others among our contemporaries, will have it that no believer of the present day can, without divorcing himself from present experience and culture, believe 'that in the *one* hypostasis of Jesus *two* real natures are united'.<sup>2</sup> 'Let me put the prior question. Does Dewart's Christian believer today accept the positive part of the Nicene decree, in which neither the term "hypostasis" nor the term "nature" occurs? If so, in the part about Jesus Christ does he observe two sections, a first containing divine predicates, and a second containing human predicates? Next, to put the question put by Cyril to Nestorius, does he accept the two series of predicates as attributes of *one and the same* Jesus Christ? If he does, he acknowledges what is meant by one hypostasis. If he does not, he does not accept the Nicene Creed. Again, does he acknowledge in one and the same Jesus Christ both divine attributes and human attributes? If he acknowledges both, he accepts what is meant by the two natures. If he does not, he does not accept the Nicene Creed.'<sup>3</sup> (The same general points are to be made about the Christological formula as the Trinitarian one. It leaves you free to conceive of 'God' and 'man' in scriptural, classical, medieval, Renaissance, or modern ways—provided only you acknowledge that the one Jesus Christ is both God and man. The doctrine can be seen quite clearly, again, to be implicit in the New Testament, where Jesus Christ is described in terms which it is proper to apply only to God, as well as being described as a man.)

<sup>1</sup>Cf. M. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 31st Edition, §217-221.

<sup>2</sup>*The Future of Belief*, p. 150.

<sup>3</sup>347.

The same applies to the characteristically Roman Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, which of course was not worked out systematically until late medieval times, as to the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Person of Christ. If this is so, the frequently reiterated objection that, since we no longer think in terms of the concept of substance, we can no longer assent to the doctrine of transubstantiation, can be dismissed as irrelevant. If the objection was that we no longer thought in terms of things and their properties, it would be relevant—but obviously false as a matter of fact. What is at issue in the case of the doctrine of the Eucharist, and what is secured admirably by the technical jargon of ‘substance’ and ‘accidents’, is that where we had previously said, ‘Here is a piece of bread’, we are to say, after the consecration, ‘Here is the Body of Christ’, though admitting that no change perceptible to the senses has taken place. This queer-sounding proposition doesn’t just stand by itself; the whole Catholic understanding of Christ’s presence among his people, and the means by which he graciously acts upon us for our salvation, is bound up with it. Like the doctrine of the Trinity, it excludes certain propositions (‘the consecrated host just *symbolizes* Christ’s body’, or ‘it is just Christ’s body in a manner of speaking, for those who like to feel that way about it’), and makes the believer take with full seriousness the Words of Institution in the Synoptic Gospels and some difficult sayings in the sixth chapter of St John’s Gospel. It leaves it quite open for the catechist or anyone else to explain, for his own benefit or that of others, just what is involved in ‘transubstantiation’, in any language which he judges to be suitable to the purpose. Transubstantiation simply does not set up as a rival to the various modern theories as to *how* Christ is present in the Eucharist; it merely states unequivocally, against qualifications Berengarian or Zwinglian, *that* he is so. One might paraphrase a remark of Wittgenstein’s: ‘Not *how* it is, but *that* it is, is the dogmatic.’<sup>1</sup>

It is obvious that the language of dogmatic theology is not the language of the Gospels, or of the piety of the ordinary believer, or of the preacher. This is not the language of worship and commitment. One hears abusive references to ‘theological chemistry’, to ‘static’ as opposed to ‘dynamic categories’, from an age that would much prefer hysteria to rationality from its theologians—and very often, it is to be feared, gets exactly what it wants. Well, of course the language of dogmatic theology is not the language of the Gospels, or of simple piety, or of preaching; but this does not entail that it does not have a vital role to play in relation to these.

<sup>1</sup>This paragraph is substantially identical with one in an article ‘The Uses of Philosophy for Theology’, which I wrote for *The Catholic Gazette* (March 1969); it is reproduced here by kind permission of the editor of that journal. The naughty thought occurs to me that, judging by some of their pronouncements, a number of authors would hold that I cannot say that the one paragraph is ‘substantially identical’ with the other, without committing myself to an outmoded metaphysical world-view of substances.

It is language which has evolved for the purpose of ensuring that the languages of worship and commitment, and so the worship and commitment enshrined by these forms of language, do not go off the rails. The concerns of the cancer-research laboratory, to take an analogy, are very different from the concerns of the doctors and patients in hospital wards where cancer is being treated; but the fact remains that the former kind of work is absolutely necessary in order that the latter may be carried out properly. Dogmatic theology is second-order reflection in which the language of worship and preaching, and so indirectly the whole business of living the Christian life, is reflected on, directed and judged in relation to the sources of revelation in Scripture and the tradition of the Church.

Very close in this respect to the views of Fr Lonergan, though in my opinion neither so lucidly expressed nor cogently argued, are those of Karl Barth. Of course Barth, as a good Protestant, does not take the Nicene and Chalcedonian definitions as absolutely demanding the assent of the believer and *a fortiori* the theologian. Nevertheless, Barth commends the Nicene and Chalcedonian definitions on the Trinity and the person of Christ as in fact expressing extraordinarily well, so far as he himself can see, what God reveals in Christ through Scripture. The reason he gives is that the terminology used in the definitions, while it is not *derived* from Scripture, can be seen to safeguard and draw attention to identities and distinctions which are at least really *implicit* in Scripture.<sup>1</sup> For Barth, however, what I have called the 'primary source' of revelation in Scripture may at any time compel the theologian to reject any one of the 'secondary sources' comprised in conciliar definitions, confessions of faith, or the consensus of revered theological authors of the past. For Fr Lonergan, as for Roman Catholics in general, these 'secondary sources' cannot be rejected, if they are sufficiently august (as is the case with conciliar and papal definitions), though their whole essence and point is to clarify and expound the revelation of God in Christ whose primary source is Scripture.

I am conscious of having raised some controversial issues. But I would ask those who disagree with me whether they believe the doctrines of the Trinity and of the divinity of Christ in any sense at all; and, if they do so, whether they also share the world-view which provided the terms in which these doctrines were first expressed. If they hold the doctrines, but do not give assent to the world-view (and any other position would surely make one *either* amazingly old-fashioned or not a Catholic at all), it is up to them to give at least some adumbration of an idea of the *sense* in which they give assent to the doctrines. Fr Lonergan's solution appears to me not only to be a perfectly satisfactory answer, but also the only available one which is not either sophistical or confused, to the dilemma which I presented at the beginning of this article.

<sup>1</sup>Cf. *Church Dogmatics* I, 1, 354; I, 2, 779f.