

The Future of Belief

by Brian Wicker

Leslie Dewart's book,¹ just published in England, is the most far-reaching philosophical reappraisal of Catholic belief that has appeared in this country in recent years. It is symptomatic of a shift of emphasis that has begun to appear in Catholic thinking generally – away from 'progressive' preoccupations with the modernisation of the church, the liturgy, the parish, the 'community' and towards a new way of thinking and feeling about God. The modernisation programme – at least in terms of books – is wearing thin. Its slogans no longer seem much more relevant than the ones they replaced. They do not offer a satisfactory answer to the question 'What the hell does it all mean?' As Sebastian Moore rightly says, in his new book *God is a New Language* (which is another symptom of the same shift in emphasis), 'what is *within the circle* (i.e. of progressive theologians) a revolution appears to the wider world to be a purely domestic battle, offering no more than the journalistic interest of a palace revolution'. Whereas – the implication is – what is needed is a *real* revolution. Dewart's work is largely subversive: helping to prepare for that revolution and suggesting the outlines of a strategy.

I have some reservations about Dewart's thesis. In one sense I think he goes too far, and almost loses touch with the church as a community at all – and thus what is being hinted at is liable to become only an intellectual revolution, not one that overturns the world. There is too little link between the theological task of agonising reappraisal and the political task of agonising upheaval. And hence there is too little sense of the sheer magnitude of what is being asked for, or the weight of opposition that will be encountered. The theological appraisal could become an escape from history, just as the milieu-Catholicism so ably diagnosed by Carl Amery in his study of the German church was (and is) an escape from history. And to escape history is to escape God even in the moment of trying to rediscover him.

But there is a positive gain to be set against these losses. This is the possibility that the new theological reappraisal, being concerned with the most basic things of religion as the individual experiences them in himself, might once more bring the radical and the conservative together in a kind of common pursuit. For what lies behind some of the conservative thinking (by no means all) is really

¹ *The Future of Belief*, Leslie Dewart. (Burns & Oates; 30s.)

a concern with the reality and profundity of our belief in God. It is felt that all the progressive worries about liturgy, community, church 'structures' and social commitment are missing the real thing. The radical like Dewart agrees. There is, of course, a fundamental difference between them. For the God of the conservative is, to the radical, an idol of our own making. Nevertheless, they are at any rate both talking about the same problem – how to speak of God. The danger of this possible line-up is that it will create a new split in the church – between the modernising streamliners engaged in their 'palace revolution', and the conservative/radical alliance engaged in their exploration of the future of belief. The latter will soon have left behind most of the things that the former are still trying – not terribly successfully – to get started. Once more there is the danger of a rift between bishops and the avant-garde. Just at the moment when the bishops are stepping on to the bottom of the streamlined escalator of structural renewal, the avant-garde are stepping off it at the top, and finding a world there which is as dead as the world they left behind at the bottom. Or is it that they are the ones who are dead – because of the rarefaction of the intellectual atmosphere they breathe up there, in the thin air of Heidegger and Marx? Are they missing the full rich life of parish democracy and the packaged salvation history available in plastic catechetical containers as advertised in the new coloured *Universe*? I don't know: all one can do is hope that (as Sebastian Moore puts it) 'The experience of being totally at loggerheads on the deepest things of life with people to whom we are bound in a common faith may be as creative as it is painful'. Maybe.

Leslie Dewart's book is an attack on the received philosophy of official Catholicism. It rejects both the relevance and, more importantly, the validity of scholasticism, including that of St Thomas. Whether this attack is fully merited is too big a question to argue fully here. What matters first of all is that it is a serious, and argued philosophical attack by a fully committed Catholic philosopher. Of course, there have been anti-scholastic philosophies in the post-Tridentine church before – that of Newman being, I suppose, the most significant. But none, I think has been so radical in its conclusions, nor so explicitly opposed to the whole tenor of scholastic thought.

The first place where this attack becomes evident is in the initial discussion of Christian theism and contemporary experience (Chapter 1). Mr Dewart accepts, in its main drift, Freud's criticism that Christianity as actually experienced in the modern world boils down to a wish-fulfilment or 'illusion'. Christianity, for the ordinary man, is essentially a 'system of doctrines and pledges that on the one hand explains the riddle of the world to him with an enviable completeness, and on the other assures him that a solicitous Providence is watching over him and will make up to him in a future existence for any shortcomings in this life'. (So Freud.)

Now Freud was a pessimist, who believed that if man cannot accept this patently infantile world-view he must reconcile himself to living in an unfriendly world where he is an insignificant and helpless spectator. Modern man cannot be happy, because God is no longer looking after him. Dewart's answer to this is not that of hellenised Christianity – namely that man *does* obtain happiness, but not in this world, only in the next. It is that of a more authentic christianity – namely that happiness is not man's true end. Man's true end is something far more outgoing than happiness – namely love. It is only by rejecting both Freud and hellenised Christianity, with their ethic of happiness as man's objective, that we can avoid having to admit that the future of belief is only the future of an illusion:

'If the world is envisaged as man's home, and if the purposiveness of conscious existence is conceived as *being* and not as *being happy*, the future forecast by Freud for the religious illusion might well come true – but in the form of a further development of Christian theism, not in that of its disappearance' (p. 26).

This sentence sums up the whole of Dewart's enterprise. In order to carry it out he has to explain the true nature of christian theism (Chapter 2), and then he has to show how this theism can be truly said to be present in past theologies, and in the present life of christians (even if only distortedly) and may continue in the future. In other words, he has to work out a theory of the development of doctrine which is not just the explicitation of what was once implicit, or the clarification of what was once but obscurely expressed. It has to be a theory which allows for the genuinely *new*. And this he holds was never possible under the hellenistic categories of potency and act, and the epistemological presuppositions of that language. (Thus I think Dewart would not admit the validity of Archbishop Dwyer's remark, in his letter to Fr Herbert McCabe printed in the March issue of *New Blackfriars*, that while the *substance* of the faith is unchangeable its *expression* 'changes as language and manner of thinking change and as the Church sees deeper into and draws out more fully the implications of the Faith once given by God through Christ and his apostles'. This is not just an inadequate, or approximate way of putting the matter. It seriously fails to make sense of the idea of development at all. If this is what the doctrine of development means, it does not do the job it sets out to do and fails to account for the evidence which inspired it in the first place. Perhaps it is at points like this that the most difficult and intractable difference between the Catholic radicals and the generality of the bishops makes itself felt: namely at the level of the most basic philosophical presuppositions and the language which enshrines them. What the latter think to be merely statements of ordinary, orthodox and accepted Catholic belief may to the former be incoherent and unintelligible and in need of total replacement. It is at this level that the most important dialogue needs to take place.)

On the true nature of genuine christian theism, Dewart is exciting and penetrating. Theism is a kind of mirror-image of atheism. Now there are two kinds of atheism: there is that of (say) Heidegger, which is so absolute that the notion of God ceases even to be worth alluding to. Bothering to deny God explicitly is at least to affirm that he is sufficiently intelligible for it to be worth-while showing that he does not exist. *Absolute* atheism is so uninterested in everything concerned with God that it does not even care to deny him. There is, however, a *relative* atheism – say that of Marx – in which the notion that something is God is intelligible enough. The only question is which thing is God? – and for Marx, man is God. Just as there is an absolute and a relative atheism, there is a relative and an absolute theism. The latter popularly expresses itself in the habit of treating anything that looks as if it might be God with the religious awe and respect due to God. This uncritical respect for anything that smacks of God is unchristian, because it does not distinguish belief in the *true* God from belief in a possibly false God. The Christian's belief in God is not absolute – he must be continually criticising his own belief in order to make sure that it is true. Christian theism is relative, just as Marxist atheism is relative. Both imply the real possibility of belief degenerating into the pursuit of a false God.

Two consequences follow from this, and these constitute the centre of Dewart's philosophical enquiry. The first is that the christian cannot escape the need to have a theory of *truth*, in order to be able to establish that the God he believes in is the true God and not another. The second is that he needs to show that belief in this true God, and all that goes with it, is not so tied to a particular philosophical and cultural system that in order to buy this belief you have to buy some particular cultural package (say the mediaeval scholastic package). Chapters 3 and 4 of his book deal respectively with these problems. The first tries to develop a totally non-scholastic, non-hellenistic theory of truth, and the second tries to show that Christian belief is not tied to any definitive formulations which, of their very nature, commit us to the cultural norms of that formulation. That is to say christianity is historical, inescapably and to its very roots.

Dewart's theory of truth begins from the premiss that what characterises the distinctively human form of knowledge is self-consciousness. The hellenistic and scholastic theory of knowledge does not take this sufficiently into account, or distinguish except in degree the kind of knowledge that an animal can have from that of men. In both cases, according to scholastic theory, knowledge is essentially a matter of the 'intentional appropriation' by the subject of objects other than itself, and, correlatively, of the self-disposition of the self towards other beings. The difference between man and the animals is that man has the capacity – or at any rate a greater capacity – to appropriate the external world by means of concepts which enable him to know the world without actually having to

grasp it in his own hands, so to speak. But this capacity does not alter the fact that knowledge consists essentially in the appropriation of external objects. It follows from this theory that *truth* is the conformity of the knowing subject to the object known. It is the adequacy of our representations to the things represented. Now Dewart criticises this view of truth as being empirically and logically incoherent, in that it asserts a relation of conformity, or adequacy, but makes this relation both (a) 'a relation of conformity to the other' and (b) 'a relation unilaterally effected by and unilaterally existing in, the knower alone'. In other words, it tacitly supposes 'that we can conceive and understand knowledge from the outside, as if we could witness from a third, "higher" viewpoint, the union of two lower things, object and subject' (p. 95). Instead of this theory he proposes another. Man's kind of knowing is not just a more comprehensive understanding, of a larger number of objects, than that of the animals. It is radically different, by virtue of the fact that in knowing anything in the external world man finds that he is aware of his own presence to himself. This presence of man to himself becomes apparent *in* his act of knowing. Now this presence is not just another case of appropriating an object. What the subject is aware of here is not 'objectified'. Hence, in his most distinctively human act, man does not increase his knowledge by a grasp of more objects, or by the greater complexity of his concepts. His knowledge does not develop by addition, but by *intensification*. This is because his awareness of himself is not an awareness that can increase *quantitatively*, for the object of this awareness is already present as a whole from the first. His awareness of himself can only increase by becoming more intense. And this means that man's knowledge is a continuously developing knowledge. It does not presuppose some fixed and static object known, from which greater knowledge grows by additional steps but which remains substantially immutable in itself as originally presented. On the contrary it suggests a process of intensification in which there is nothing immutable, no definitive truths, nothing that so to speak holds up the process of greater self-awareness, nothing which is not totally surpassed as the process of increasing consciousness proceeds.

It is on the basis of this mechanism of knowledge, and the concomitant notion that truth cannot even be retained unless it continuously grows, that a concept of the development of the Christian truth is possible. The logic of human life is the progressive self-differentiation of man from the reality with which it was 'originally continuous and united in un-differentiation'. Truth, therefore, is not a matter of a fixed conformity of a static subject to a static object, but of the deepening and intensifying *fidelity* of man to the reality which envelops him.

But man is a social and cultural being, and his grasp of truth is a public rather than a private affair. This means that in the case of

Christian doctrine (which is the belief of a society rather than an individual) the true evolution of the Church's teaching is not only possible but inevitable. Just as man is the product of evolution, in the sense that he is the being that *was* an animal but *is not* an animal any more ('Man's present history is an ex-animal one') so present christian doctrine is the doctrine that *was* the doctrine of the early church but *is not* the doctrine of the early church any more. Its history is totally evolutionary. Christian doctrine cannot help being, at every particular time, cast in a cultural form that is of that time; but it equally cannot help evolving away from that formulation into something new. 'The only valid "criterion" of truth is that it creates the possibility of more truth. And the most reliable sign that we are coming to the truth is that we are dissatisfied with it'. (p. 111) It is not that more *truths*, or new *aspects* of truth, or new ways of expressing the truth appear in Christian history. It is that that very *truth* itself intensifies, and becomes more meaningful, more self-aware.

If Christian truth is evolutionary in this sense, and never complete, then there will always be a certain inadequacy in our concept of God. This *normal* inadequacy comes from the fact that God is necessarily beyond all conceptual formulation, and cannot be grasped in the way that any other object can be grasped. It means that there will always be room for further development of the christian understanding of God. 'There is no foreseeable point at which we shall no longer tend towards God' (p. 126). But this normal inadequacy must be sharply distinguished from an *abnormal* inadequacy, which arises from our side. If the concept of God that we have is in any way false (that is, if we are unfaithful to the true God in any way) then this will adversely affect the development of Christian belief. The static, a-historical hellenistic notion of God, imported into Christianity, did this. For development can't be halted, only distorted. Historically it took the form of replacing the critical relative theism of Christianity by the absolute theism of a credulous sub-christian cult. Mr Dewart expands this point with an important discussion of the distortion of Trinitarian belief in modern times into a kind of '*crypto-tritheism*'. He also shows that the scholastic version of this hellenisation was actually the natural progenitor of modern atheism, and led straight to it.

If the hellenistic concept of God is to be rejected, however, we need some indication of an alternative that is adequate to our present, modern experience. In other words we cannot arrive at the outlines of an intelligible concept of God for our time unless we accept that the search for such a concept must begin with the concrete problems of our time, rather than with the abstract scholastic questions that were once burning issues but are so no longer. The starting point of such a search must be the recognition that the scholastic presuppositions only allow us to think of God as sending

us cryptic messages *about* himself, rather than giving us himself in his actuality. 'Belief must bear directly upon the reality of God, not upon words or concepts.' It must also bear on man in his contingency. Now today man feels himself to be contingent not because (in the old scholastic terminology) his essence and his existence are distinct, but because his factual reality 'requires him to appear to himself, to come-into-being-in-and-for-himself, to make up his own role as he is suddenly pushed onto the stage of life. In other words man's contingency is the fact that in order to be he must create himself' (p. 169).

The difference between this religious notion of human contingency and that of a purely humanistic philosophy is that, for the Christian, the self-creation of man by himself is only possible and meaningful because God is himself present within this process. Indeed, this historical process *is* the locus of God's presence to man – there can be no other way in which we can conceive of God. This means that the abstract question of God's *existence*, in the sense that it is posed in (say) the five ways of St Thomas, is simply irrelevant. It no longer matters, and perhaps no longer even makes sense, to speak as if the question whether God exists or not is the central issue of a Christian metaphysic. It is the *presence* of God to man that is the burning question. In a sense it is a matter of philosophical priorities. If God *is* historically present to man, then the abstract question of whether he *exists* is merely academic. To suppose that before we can say that God is present to man, we have to settle the question whether such a being exists at all is to begin from a particular, and contingent philosophical viewpoint that is no longer relevant to modern experience. (I have argued something like this myself in respect of the notion of the real presence in the eucharist in *The Ministry of the Word*, *New Blackfriars*, November 1965.) From the irrelevance of the scholastic notion that God is 'a being' who 'exists', Dewart goes on to dispose of some other of the 'attributes' of God that no longer seem to be relevant or meaningful – his 'personality' for example. We no longer think of personality as the pinnacle of a cosmic hierarchy. We see it as that kind of life which, characteristically aspires to go beyond itself. 'Personality is what we start from, not what we aspire to, namely God'. Hence God is not an eternal person above history, who has a divine plan for the world. The fundamental relation of man and God is their *mutual presence in the conscious creation of the world*. God's omnipotence consists in 'the radical openness of nature and history to be fashioned into absolutely anything' (p. 195). Hence the final success of man is not assured in advance by God by any kind of pre-arranged conclusion. In this sense, Dewart argues, christianity is like Marxism – only without the latter's surreptitious determinism. (For in Marxism men make their own history, but only within a given environment which conditions them and which they have to accept.) Without God's presence in

history Marxism might well be true. God's presence – and *only* his presence – releases man from having to be tied, even in that degree of bondage, to external causality. It makes him really and totally free.

Finally, in view of these radical changes in our concept of God, it may even seem eventually absurd of man to take up an attitude of submission to God. 'Christian theism of the future might so conceive God as to find it possible to look back with amusement on the day when it was thought particularly appropriate that the believer should bend his knee in order to worship God' (pp. 203–4).

This last statement may well be one that brings the ordinary, or even the fairly radical Christian, up with a jolt. Is this not just a raising of human pride, which implies a complete rejection of God altogether? What is the point of continuing to talk of God, in the presence of radical reappraisals such as this? (Consistently with his position Dewart does, finally, go on to suggest that the word *God* may indeed be superseded.) Isn't Dewart just a plain atheist who does not, or will not admit the fact? Now in one sense, he has already forestalled that objection. To label someone an atheist suggests that we are fairly clear about what kind of being he disbelieves in. But Dewart has already shown, convincingly, that this is not so easy as it sounds. Before we can decide whether a man is an atheist or not, we have to know whether the God he disbelieves in is the true God, or just some pseudo God. For example a man who 'does not believe in the *existence* of God' may be, not an atheist, but just a christian philosopher who (like Dewart) does not believe in the intelligibility of the metaphysic which alone gives rise to that kind of abstract question.

All the same, there *is* a real difficulty buried here. Is the choice that Dewart is forcing us to make, between the hellenistic/scholastic philosophy and that which he advocates the right one? Or – to put the matter more forcefully – is Dewart's alternative fully intelligible? At times he is compelled into locutions that suggest doubts on that score. These cluster around certain key words such as 'being', 'truth', 'reality'. We read, for example, 'the purposeiveness of conscious existence is conceived as *being* and not as *being happy*' (p. 26); 'Man can know not only beings, but be-ing; not only being-as-other, but also being-itself' (p. 81); truth 'is the fidelity of consciousness to being' (p. 92); 'There can be, beyond the totality of all actually existing being, something *present* to us in experience' (p. 177). Now I do not quote these phrases in order to poke fun at them for naive logical flaws. They appear in a context of intelligent argument, and it would be unfair to pretend that they do not have, in that context, a certain kind of sense. They constitute points at which Dewart tries to show how pieces of the total argument coalesce, or where different threads are pulled together. What I feel hesitant about is whether the argument can in fact, hang to-

gether in that kind of way. I am inclined to think that what Dewart's argument reveals is rather a set of paradoxes, and that it is in the gaps opened up by these paradoxes that God is to be found.

One way of putting this is to point out the paucity of concrete examples in the analysis of the key concepts. For example, it is not clear how the notion of *truth* as a fidelity, rather than as a conformity, to the world is related to any specific *truths*. The general direction of Dewart's argument about the nature of truth is, I think sufficiently clear; but how it is to be applied in the analysis of this or that true proposition I am not sure. What sense can be made of the notion that, say, 'Mark wrote the earliest gospel' or 'John loves Mary' are to be construed, not as statements representing a mind's conformity to the world, but as a person's *fidelity* to it – fidelity being, in this context, precisely something that can grow, become more intense (which, we are told, is the only valid criterion of truth)? John's love for Mary can become more intense: but that the truth enshrined in the statement that he does so itself becomes more intense as his love intensifies is not, to my mind, clear.

What lies behind this problem, I think, is an insufficiently exact conception of the way the development, or intensification of something is actually experienced in perception. It seems to me that to affirm a truth about something within a continuous process of change (e.g. John loves Mary) is necessarily to 'freeze' it, and so in a sense distort the continuity of the process itself. Conceptualisation is always a breaking up of the continuum of experience into manageable units. This is the very process of thought and expression. 'Truth' in the general sense may be capable of a progressive intensification, under the pressure of an ever-growing fidelity to reality, but this intensification is only intelligible to us, is only articulable, in terms of particular truths which are severally distinct. Similarly, while it makes sense to speak of the absolute freedom of man, in the presence of God, to make his own future, this future actually confronts us as a set of separate particular possibilities and actions which are already half formed but are as yet uncompleted. My future is, so to speak, already structured (and to that extent closed) by what is visible of it in my present situation, and to that extent I can only go on into it along certain tracks. (To do otherwise would not be to continue the present in a different, unexpected way: it would be to abolish the connectedness of events altogether.)

My own view therefore is that the project of totally replacing the static scholastic philosophy by a purely dynamic, historical one is a philosophical impossibility. That there is a certain validity in it is, I think, undeniable. But the notion that experience is reducible under one comprehensive and self-consistent view is mistaken. Human experience is fundamentally paradoxical. It is, so to say, 'faulted' and it is along the fault lines that we find exposed the signs of God's presence. He lives where the two systems meet but do not merge.

And since, along that edge there is only a line – which is not a thing, or even a space where there might be a thing, this paradoxicality reveals God's *absence* as a particular being but his presence as a hope for a different mode of experience, to be found perhaps in a new heaven and a new earth which is free from this kind of faulting.

This conclusion, if true, is important in a practical way, since it has direct practical, even political implications. For one of the urgent questions that Dewart's thesis raises is whether there is anything to distinguish Christian theism as he envisages it from (for instance) the 'total secular redemption' of man by his own efforts, as has been envisaged by Raymond Williams in *Modern Tragedy*. At a first glance, it seems hard to see what difference there is between man's self-redemption in the light of God's historical presence, and his self-redemption through a purely secular-humanist revolution. Furthermore, both conceptions seem to suffer from the same kind of logical and philosophical flaws.² This problem becomes acute if we take seriously Dewart's assertion that 'there is no foreseeable point at which we shall no longer *tend* towards God' (p. 126). I am not sure if this means that there is no longer any sense to the idea of an end of history, a final winding-up of the empirical cosmos. An important article by Dewart, on the eschatological meaning of celibacy and its diminishing significance for a world which no longer expects 'that the parousia should be . . . a discrete event which begins to occur at a certain moment of Aristotelean time' seems to suggest that in fact there is no end at all to history.³ The *parousia*, on this view, is simply 'God's self-extrusion into the world, as the fulfilment of God's gracious incarnation . . . (it is) the presence of Christ insofar as this presence is historical, transforming, progressive and evolving'.

This view seems to me inadequate. It is only on the basis of some kind of cosmic ending (which would of course be also a transfiguration of the cosmos, an inauguration, a rebirth from a true death of history) that there seems to be any possibility of a reconciliation between the two incompatible conceptual systems that (as I see it) we cannot do without, despite their mutual incompatibility. The paradox of experience itself demands this 'catastrophic' conclusion. In the perspective of the present order, in which we find, sacramentally, the beginning of this end, it seems possible to distinguish total secular redemption from total christian redemption only if, on the stage of history itself, we can find some distinctive structure that already belongs to this future. The church, a body in some sense within the greater society of mankind, but empirically distinguishable within that larger grouping, is the only possible candidate for this role. Thus one consequence of my criticism of

²For an examination of these flaws in Raymond Williams' book see Walter Stein's articles in *New Blackfriars* February and March 1967, and *Slant*, June/July, 1967

³*Commonweal* April 22, 1966.

Dewart's philosophical enterprise is that he has not, explicitly, dealt with the problem of the future structure and role of the church itself. He is right, of course, to insist on the need to work out a contemporary concept of God, and to emphasize that this has not been sufficiently dealt with in recent theology. But there cannot, in the last analysis, be any distinction, even methodologically, between envisaging a true and relevant modern concept of God and envisaging a relevant concept of the church.

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