

A note by the Editor:

The exchange between Professor Michael Dummett and Professor Nicholas Lash which we published in our October and December issues (pp. 424–431; 552–566) has attracted quite a lot of attention in the press. Is a ‘liberal consensus’, supposedly adopted by a large number of theologians and seminary teachers, undermining the unity of the Roman Catholic Church? This is what they were arguing about. We promised to print some contributions on questions raised in the debate. Here are two, by Timothy Radcliffe and Joseph Fitzpatrick.

Interrogating the Consensus: a response to Michael Dummett

Timothy Radcliffe OP

Professor Michael Dummett, in the October *New Blackfriars*, quotes an article by Thomas Sheehan which asserts that there is ‘a liberal consensus’ among Catholic Biblical scholars as to the historical basis of our faith. This consensus includes such views as that Jesus did not think that he was divine, that Mary was not a virgin and that Joseph was the natural father of Jesus, that Jesus did not refer to himself when he talked of the Son of Man but rather to some future apocalyptic figure, and that the remains of his corpse are still in a tomb in Palestine. Professor Dummett maintains that these views are a denial of the solemn teachings of the Church, and in his subsequent article (the one which appeared in December) he argues that if they are accepted then ‘that teaching is reduced to a demand for the acceptance of certain forms of words, which may be taken as expressing anything one chooses’ (566). I would agree with Professor Dummett, but I would question the existence of such a consensus. In fact, in a letter published in *The Tablet* of 5 March, commenting on *The Tablet’s* report of the debate between Professor Dummett and Professor Lash, Father Raymond Brown (who is Auburn Distinguished Professor of Biblical Studies at Union Theological Seminary, New York) writes:

... I found no better example of ultra-liberal distortion than the writing of Thomas Sheehan. From personal experience, I know very well the kind of biblical exegesis that is being taught in most Roman Catholic seminaries in the United States and it is a very moderate centrist presentation, almost diametrically

opposed to Sheehan's interpretations of the New Testament.

The truth is that Sheehan offers us a ragbag of propositions, some of which are widely held by Catholic scholars and some of which are not, some of which are perfectly compatible with the teaching of the Church and some of which do not seem to me to be so.

The danger of disseminating the impression that there is such a consensus is that people who hold one view, such as that Jesus did not believe himself to be divine, are easily assumed to hold others, such as that Joseph was the father of Jesus. This creates just the sort of atmosphere of distrust and suspicion which is so subversive of the honest pursuit of the truth. With every proposition we must ask ourselves two questions: Is it in fact widely held and taught by Catholic biblical scholars? And does it actually imply a rejection of the solemn teachings of the Church? I am not in a position to give anything other than an impressionistic answer to the first question, based on the reading of some Catholic periodicals. In answer to the second I shall look at some of the items of this imagined consensus and ask how far they are compatible with orthodox Catholicism.

Did Jesus refer to himself as The Son of Man?

The Sheehan consensus includes the belief that when Jesus talked of 'The Son of Man' he was not talking about himself but some other, awaited, apocalyptic figure. Professor Dummett argues that 'if Jesus did not refer to himself in speaking of the Son of Man, then the gospel accounts of his words are hopelessly garbled, and hence we cannot claim to know what he taught.' (p. 561) This seems to be fair enough. Many of the gospel sayings would not make sense if Jesus was not talking about himself when he used this title. For example: 'A scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head".' (Mt. 8:19—20). One might reply to Dummett that there are other sayings in the gospels which would still make still perfectly good sense, and a sense not so different from the one they bear in the gospels, if Jesus was talking about someone else when he used this title. For example: 'For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.' (Mk. 8:38). In the past some scholars used to propose that the title might then have been transferred to other sayings, when Jesus was himself subsequently identified as the Son of Man. But this is a mere quibble. My reading of current Catholic biblical literature suggests that it is simply not the case that there is any widely held belief that Jesus ever used this title of anyone other than himself. It was a theory that was once proposed but failed to become popular. There is almost no evidence that in the time of Jesus 'the Son of Man' was a

recognised title. Since the first person to have used it as such seems to have been Jesus, one would have to argue both that he invented the usage *and* got its application wrong. We may not know quite what he meant by the title, but since it is almost only ever used by Jesus and apparently about himself, it makes most sense to imagine that this reflects his own usage.

We could, at this point, heave a sigh of relief and move on to some more hotly disputed topic. But there is implicit in Professor Dummett's formulation another issue at which we ought to glance. He says that the consequence of believing that Jesus did not refer to himself as the Son of Man would be that 'we cannot claim to know what he taught'. I take it that by this he means that we could not know what the historical Jesus said, his *ipsissima verba*. Would that matter? Would my faith in Jesus be well-grounded if I did not know what the historical Jesus actually said? There *is* a consensus among Catholic biblical scholars that the gospels do not report the exact words and deeds of the historical Jesus, but are attempts to express the significance of his life, death and resurrection in narrative form. The oral traditions were redacted, rewritten, to explore the mystery of his identity and of the salvation that he has achieved for us. As a Christian I must believe the gospels. That is to say, I must accept them as true theological statements of the mystery of our salvation. But I am not thereby committed to believing that any single saying of Jesus that we find in the gospels exactly reports the words of that historical person. It could be, though it is extremely unlikely, that in every instance his sayings have been redacted in the light of his subsequent death and resurrection and of the theological concerns of the gospel writers. This would not matter since I believe in Pentecost and the Church, and so I can accept that these interpretations are true. I must surely believe that any hypothetical reconstructions of the words and deeds of the historical Jesus would show him to have been the sort of person about whom it would be honest to make such theological claims. We could not proclaim that he was the Son of God, the revelation of the Father, if historical research actually established that he was a completely different sort of person from the one we find described in the gospels. If it was proved that he was a violent revolutionary who went up to Jerusalem to organise a revolt against the Romans and died on the cross an angry and bitter man, then one would either have to conclude that the Church was wrong, and that one could no longer in all honesty recite the Creed, or else that one's historical research was faulty. But my faith is not based on any reconstruction of its historical basis. It would be useful to know what Jesus actually did and said while he was wandering around Galilee, but not so that I could know what I ought to believe but so as to better understand the evolution of Christian belief during the first century and so what sorts of theological documents the gospels are. If I knew the oral tradition prior to Mark, then it would help me to understand what sort of a document his gospel is.

Many Catholic scholars have found this historical agnosticism unnerving. And that is because we have found ourselves caught between the presupposition of the Enlightenment, which underlies much Protestant biblical scholarship, that the tradition betrays and that dogma is the product of prejudice, and one of the central tenets of Catholicism, which is that tradition mediates the truth. Ben Meyer wrote, 'With the scientific revolution—the intoxicating experience of knowledge unmediated by *auctores*—Europe reached a point where it had either to re-appropriate its traditions or disavow and debunk them. It fastened on the second option. The result was an era of wholesale "prejudice against all prejudices", which, through the mediation of a Romanticism superficially opposed to it, culminated in positivism and the "objectivity of the empty head".' Once it was discovered that the gospels are theological, dogmatic documents, it was therefore naturally concluded that they must conceal the true Christ. Any attempt to discover what the true Christ was like must then work with the assumption that he was misrepresented by the tradition. If the gospels are not the impressions of the detached, impartial observer, then they must be the result of prejudice. But it is becoming increasingly clear that this is itself a prejudiced assumption. There are no scholarly grounds for assuming that because the gospels are theological interpretations they have therefore got Jesus wrong.

Let us apply this to the title 'Son of Man'. I am not bound by the Church's teaching to believe that Jesus ever used this title of himself. In principle I am quite free to argue that it was a title invented by the Early Church, on the basis of Daniel 7, and found to be useful for expressing the mystery of his identity. In fact on purely scholarly grounds this is an implausible thesis. It is much more likely that Jesus used it of himself, even if it is probable that for him the title did not have the rich theological overtones that it later acquired in the light of his death and resurrection. After all, in Galilean Aramaic 'son of man', *bar nash(a)*, can simply be a circumlocution for the first person singular. It was probably a christological title that acquired theological weight only in the course of time, but we neither know nor need to know.

The Virginal Conception of Jesus.

Another element of this 'liberal consensus' is supposed to be the belief that despite the affirmation of the Creed, Jesus had a natural father, Joseph, and that the stories of his conception by the Holy Spirit in the gospels of Matthew and Luke must therefore be read as purely symbolic expressions of the belief that he was, in some sense, the Son of God. Dummett claims that such a 'reinterpretation' of the Creed is in fact its betrayal.

Is there such a consensus among Catholic biblical scholars? An article by Raymond Brown, published in October 1986 in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*,² surveys recent literature on this topic and, though he mentions

a couple of scholars who opt for a purely symbolic interpretation of Mary's virginity, it is clear that it would be nonsensical to speak of a consensus to that effect. That should answer Professor Dummett's legitimate fears. It is still worth asking how in this instance the question of historicity relates to that of theological claim.

When Matthew and Luke tell us of how Mary conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is clear that they are interested in articulating a theological insight into who Jesus is rather than asserting a physiological fact about Mary. Whether Mary was or was not, in the literal sense, a virgin is of no interest *in itself*. The stories are only told as an expression of the evangelists' belief that Jesus was the Son of God, God-with-us and so on. It is easy to move from the perception that these stories have a primarily symbolic function to the conclusion that therefore the historicity of Mary's virginity is neither of interest or consequence. Brown himself believes that although biblical scholarship cannot prove that Mary was a virgin, yet this remains the most plausible explanation for the genesis of the gospel accounts: 'Of course Jesus was conceived, but that he was conceived without a human father one cannot decide by the ordinary rules of biblical evidence, even if the earliness of the tradition (before our written Gospels) and the lack of other plausible explanations make historicity the stronger likelihood.'⁵ The only thing that can decide the issue is appeal to the infallibility of the Church: 'In my judgment only the infallible teaching of the Church can settle the question of historicity when factuality is seen as an intrinsic necessity in the christology of the creedal affirmation "born of the virgin Mary".'⁴

I would like to argue that the use of the symbolism of Mary's virginity by Matthew and Luke *in itself* implies that it was an historical fact. Of course, their interest in using this symbolism is theological rather than biological, but the symbolism would not be justified unless it were also the case that she was historically a virgin. One's acceptance of the historicity of the statement should be based not on just a bare appeal to the infallibility of the Church, but on the belief, shared by many non-Catholics, in the truth of the gospels as theological and symbolic interpretations of the mystery. There are purely symbolic uses of the idea of virginity in the Old Testament, as in Jeremiah 31:4, 'Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel.' But one might argue that in the case of Jesus' conception, the symbolism is used to suggest such a radical novelty, God's only-begotten Son dwelling with us, that the symbolism would not be appropriate or justified if one did not also believe it to be historically true. If Joseph were the natural father of Jesus, then Jesus' conception would not have been the sort of event that would justify the symbolism of conception by the Holy Spirit. Think of the ways in which barrenness and virginity are alike and different. They are both reasons why a woman should not bear a son; both could be used either

literally, physiologically, or symbolically. There is a whole succession of barren women who bear children, from Sarah to Elizabeth. Its symbolic usage is independent of any knowledge of its physiological basis, which could not have been known in those days. To say that a woman is barren is essentially to make a biographical statement about her. One can imagine someone saying, 'I thought that I was barren until I became pregnant with Tarquin.' But it is different with virginity. It would be curious if someone said that she thought that she was a virgin until she realised that Tarquin was on the way. A virgin conceiving a child implies a novelty of a quite different order from that of a barren woman becoming pregnant. That is, of course, the contrast that is being made between Elizabeth and Mary in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. In both cases we have a symbolism of God's merciful drawing near to his people and causing something new to happen. Both are symbols of God's free gift of life. But the one implies a historical basis which is not necessary for the proper symbolic functioning of the other.

Against that one could object that God's Only-begotten Son could have become incarnate through the ordinary processes of human reproduction if God had so wished it. One could argue that there was no intrinsic necessity for the eternal Son not to have, as a man, a natural father, just as he had a natural mother. The birth of the Son in this way would have been just as novel an event as that implied by the traditional theology of a virginal conception, and so the *symbolism* of conception by the Holy Spirit would have been justified even though it was not historically the case. To that one would have to reply that if the Incarnation had taken place in that way, then some different symbolism for the novelty, the dwelling of God with us, would have been appropriate. Different metaphors would have been appropriate, and different questions as to the relationship between theological symbolism and historical reality would have to be considered. A final objection might be that we are misreading the evidence in claiming such a theological weight for the symbolism of a divine conception. In the classical world to which Luke belonged, it was quite common for great men, emperors, generals and even philosophers—to be ascribed to divine fathers. Romulus, Alexander the Great, Augustus and even Plato and Apollonius of Tyana were all believed to have been begotten by gods. (If we had lived in those days Mrs Thatcher would certainly have claimed Mars, God of War, for her father!) One would therefore be misunderstanding the symbolism if one believed that it necessarily implied a basis in historical fact. To that I would have to reply that such a reductionist interpretation of symbolism is justified neither by the other sorts of claims made for Jesus by the gospels, nor by the Jewish background from within which Matthew wrote his story of the conception of Jesus, nor by the traditional interpretation of this symbolism by the Church.

The Resurrection Appearances.

A third item in this 'liberal consensus' is that the appearances of Jesus to the disciples after his resurrection, as reported in the gospels, are not historical, factual accounts of what actually happened but, in the words of Sheehan, 'express in imaginative and symbolic language the belief that Jesus was somehow alive with God and would someday reappear.' (429) Dummett objects that there is no evidence for such a literary convention whereby these sorts of stories could be read as purely symbolic, and that scholars who hold this view 'point to no signposts in the texts whereby a reader versed in the convention could discriminate the symbolic form from the factual'. (430)

This time Sheehan is a bit closer to the truth. There is a consensus among New Testament scholars of all denominations that these accounts of the resurrection appearances are not supposed to be read as historical or literal accounts of what happened on Easter morning. It is not disputed that they are symbolic texts in which the evangelists struggle to express the mystery of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Otherwise it would be impossible to explain how Matthew and Luke, according to the most commonly accepted theory of textual criticism, could have taken Mark's account of the resurrection and so drastically rewritten it. There is plenty of evidence in the biblical tradition for the convention of rewriting stories to express new theological insights. Luke gives us three different accounts of the conversion of St. Paul.

It is true that, as Professor Dummett states, they give us no signposts which suggest how we are to discriminate between the symbolic and the factual. This was not because they were incapable of making such a distinction. I am sure that Mark would have been able to answer the question: But was the tomb *really* empty? It is rather that they would not have shared our concern in making such a distinction, which reflects the Enlightenment suspicion of any interpretation as necessarily a falsification. The idea of a purely historical, factual account, told from the perspective of a detached observer, a man without prejudice, the man on the Capernaum omnibus, is a very modern and questionable one. Such a suspicion of tradition and dogma would have been alien to the gospel writers. To tell any tale was to explore the significance of what happened.

As a Catholic I believe that the gospels give us true accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. They express what it means to believe that he is risen from the dead and is seated at the right hand of the Father, that in him sin and death are defeated and a new age has dawned. These are truths which cannot be expressed literally. We can, if we wish, examine the gospel accounts and try to deduce some basic historical facts, like there having been an empty tomb, but we cannot base our faith on detective work. It is more appropriate for us to ask, as with the virginal conception: What must have been the case for such weighty theological claims to be justified?

In the case of Mary we can give a literal and a symbolic meaning to her virginity. We know what would count as a physiological description of someone being a virgin. In the case of the resurrection things are more complex. The resuscitation of a corpse may or may not be a necessary consequence of the resurrection of a body but it is certainly not a literal description of it. I do not know what a camera stationed near the tomb on Easter morning would have recorded, but it could not have caught on film the conquest of sin and death and the triumph of the Father's love over hatred. It was not that sort of an event. It does not follow that nothing need have happened at all, or that the women might have accidentally come across another unused tomb and been misled. I believe, and I think that the vast majority of Catholic scholars would agree, that if the bones of Jesus lie undisturbed in Palestine, then the sort of event would not have occurred which would justify the theological claims made by the gospels. Certainly the writers of the New Testament, with their strong Jewish sense of the importance of the bodily, could not have counted anything as the resurrection of the dead that left the body of Jesus mouldering in the tomb.

It would be a truly bizarre paradox if one were to argue that the disciples had to be ignorant of what happened to Jesus' body on Easter morning if they were to be able to believe in the resurrection of the body. It is true that the earliest reference to the resurrection appearances, in I Corinthians 15, makes no mention of an empty tomb, but one could no more deduce from that that Paul, who devotes the whole of I Corinthians to nurturing a rich sense of the bodily, thought that the tomb was occupied than one could conclude that I believe in bilocation if I say that I am going to London without adding that I will therefore be absent from Oxford.

My complaint about Sheehan's report of the consensus is not that Catholic scholars are reported as believing that the gospel accounts are theological and symbolic interpretations but that the claims made are too feeble to count as faithful to the gospels or the Church's teaching. We are said to hold 'the belief that Jesus was somehow alive with God and would someday reappear' (429). We may well believe that our grandmothers are somehow alive and with God and that we shall see them again, but this does not mean that our grandmothers have triumphed over sin and death and inaugurated the new creation; most of us are happy to believe that our grandmothers' bones are lying in the cemetery. Sheehan's anaemic consensus is remote from Matthew's image of the risen Christ on the mountain invested with authority in heaven and on earth, or from John's vision of the risen Christ empowering us to forgive each other. Such theological claims could not be justified by some inner experience of the disciples; they imply at least the absence of a body.

Did Jesus believe that he was God?

Sheehan reports that 'one would be hard pressed to find a Catholic Biblical scholar who maintains that Jesus thought he was the divine Son of God who pre-existed from all eternity as the second person of the Trinity before he became a human being.' (p 428) Professor Dummett objects, but not on the grounds that the Church directly teaches that Jesus knew that he was divine, nor because as God made man he must have known that he was God. His argument is that there could be no warrant for making such an extraordinary claim if Jesus had not made it himself. One might study his life and personality and conclude that he was the Christ of God and that therefore one ought to believe what he said, but one could never deduce his divinity from his life. The only possible ground for moving from the assertion that he was a man to the claim that he was God would be that he himself had said so.

Here we do seem to have a problem. For once Sheehan does seem to be accurately reporting the consensus of modern Catholic biblical scholarship. Yet Michael Dummett's argument is not to be easily dismissed. Should we therefore conclude that either the scholars are wrong or that we have no warrant for claiming that Jesus was divine? I believe neither to be necessary.

Jesus neither asserted nor denied that he was God, but this was not because he was ignorant of his identity but because such a way of stating his identity would have made no sense, either for him or for anyone else, within the religious world into which he was born. I simply cannot imagine that Jesus ever said to himself or to his disciples, 'Actually, I think that I am God.' Such a thought would have been unthinkable, except by a lunatic, in that theological tradition. But it is not necessarily the case that we lay hold of our identities by asserting a number of propositions about ourselves. Jesus knew who he was in the sense that he called God his *Abba*, his Father.⁵ He believed himself to be utterly from and of the Father. That was the proper, and indeed the only, way for the man Jesus to grasp the mystery of his identity as the Second Person of the Trinity. One has an identity in virtue of standing in various relationships with others, as the framers of the doctrine of the Trinity well knew. And the One who was from all Eternity of the Father took flesh and blood as a man who stood in all sorts of relationships of forgiveness and compassion, confrontation and invitation, and prayed to his *Abba*. The Resurrection, Pentecost and the birth of the Church created a new theological context in which new things could be said and thought. Within a few years of Easter Paul could talk of Jesus as the pre-existent Wisdom of God. What would warrant such a breakthrough? It is not the case that what we have here is properly described just in terms of theological development—Jesus claimed to be no more than a man and Paul plucks up his theological courage and goes further. If that was how it was then Dummett's objection would hold. I

would rather say that the Resurrection and Pentecost, God's intervention in human history, show that what it meant for Jesus to call upon God as his *Abba* is for him to be the Pre-existent wisdom of God. For Paul to have claimed less would have been for him, living in this post-resurrectional context, to say less than Jesus did.

I have also argued at length elsewhere⁶ that the break with Judaism after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, and the transformation of Christian identity which one finds, for example, in the Johannine churches, created a new theological context in which it could be seen for the first time that what it meant for Jesus to be the Pre-existent Son was for him to be the Word who 'was with God and was God'. There is an obvious sense in which this is a novel claim. Perhaps no one had said, before John's gospel, quite so clearly and unambiguously that Jesus was God. But it would be misleading to think of this as an advance on thinking that he was a man—once we had thought that Jesus was one sort of a thing and now we think that he is also another sort of a thing, which we call God. Rather, it would be more faithful to the evidence to say that the relationship which was from the beginning seen to be constitutive of Jesus' identity, his relationship with his Father, can now be seen at the heart of the mystery of the Godhead.

Conclusion

I do not think that there is any evidence that modern Catholic biblical scholarship is in danger of plunging into heterodoxy. Every item of the 'liberal consensus' has turned out to be either inaccurately reported or not incompatible with the teaching of the Church. It is important not to reach for the panic button; that only inhibits the honest, hard-headed research which deepens our understanding of the mystery of our redemption. It is true that Catholics have often wanted to cry out against the exegetes in the words of Mary Magdalen on Easter morning: 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him' (John 20:13). Modern biblical scholarship has often been so infected with the Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice, the presupposition that tradition always conceals or betrays, that scholars have simply assumed that the Jesus of the Councils is a misrepresentation. Scholars have interrogated the texts of the New Testament for signs of the ultimate heresy, 'early Catholicism'. Such a suspicion was built into Enlightenment biblical scholarship. But in recent years it has become clear that this presupposition is itself a prejudice, a hidden and unacknowledged dogma. Historians studying the biblical material for the first time are frequently astonished at the unnecessary scepticism of much that they read in the theological journals.

As Catholics we have an immense debt to centuries of Protestant biblical scholarship, a debt which can never be overstated. But one of the fruits of ecumenism is already turning out to be a discipline of the study of

the Scriptures which is not inherently in tension with fidelity to the traditions of the Church. Sheehan's consensus seems rather old-fashioned to me. There is no necessary conflict between honest, intellectual analysis of the texts and adherence to the tradition. Wherever there does appear to be so, then we must believe that the tradition has hidden depths that we have yet to discover, or else we need to think more clearly.

- 1 Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, London 1979, p. 97.
- 2 Raymond E. Brown, 'Gospel Infancy Narrative Research; From 1976 to 1986: Part II (Luke)'. *CBQ*, Vol. 48, No. 4/October 1986, pp. 660—680.
- 3 *op. cit.* p. 678.
- 4 *idem.*
- 5 Geza Vermes, in *Jesus, the Jew*, Glasgow, 1976, pp 210ff, has argued that Jesus was not unique in calling God his Abba. I am unconvinced by the parallels that he draws.
- 6 '“My Lord and my God”': the locus of confession', *New Blackfriars*, Feb. 1984, pp. 52—62.

Lonergan's Method and the Dummett-Lash Dispute

Joseph Fitzpatrick

Not the least of the things that are interesting about the vigorous dispute between Professor Michael Dummett and Professor Nicholas Lash in the October and December 1987 issues of *New Blackfriars* is that it provides an excellent opportunity for testing the practical relevance of Bernard Lonergan's much-discussed method for theology. The dispute is at heart a dispute about the appropriate way of doing theology, at least within the Roman Catholic church, and here is a chance for seeing how Lonergan helps us to discern the flaws (and the strong points too). But first of all quite a lot must be said about that method of Lonergan's, and this will fill two-thirds of this article. Lonergan may well be the theologian who will best assist us in delivering Christian theology safely into the twenty-first century, and beyond. His thinking bears the stamp of the Catholic trust in the compatibility of reason and faith, of science and religion, of the God of philosophy and the God of revelation, while at the same time the foundational role he allocates to conversion accords with one of Protestantism's basic religious insights. And, in a world in which religious fundamentalism holds such sway, he also insists on the