

The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian: Making the Claim for ‘Truth in Trial’

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In my country, and at the Institut Catholique de Paris, in debates with both bishops and representatives of the state University system, we quite often define academic theology as — in French — *une discipline confessante et critique*. It is a discipline that is both a Church function and critical science.

As the declaration of the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian puts it clearly: academic theology, as part of the very life of Christian faith, is not a free speculation about religion in general or Christian issues in particular. It is rather a responsible discourse which has the aim of taking care of the believing community’s righteousness and faithfulness. And it is as such that it intends to be a scientific discourse, able to take part in public debate because it uses the same rigorous methods as the other sciences of interpretation (sociology, history, civil law, and so on). However, many inside and outside the Church find this definition paradoxical and puzzling.

On the one hand, scholars in profane sciences suspect theology as being the ideological tool of an authoritarian institution seeking to ensure domination over believers rather than a free search for truth. In this case, to the extent that theology is a way of thinking responsible for the good and the truthfulness of the Church’s mission, it is under question and even ignored by partners who claim a monopoly of disinterestedness and total objectivity. In France, this argument is used to legitimise the exclusion of Theology and Canon Law from the state university system.

On the other hand, inside the Church significant voices criticize theologians for analysing Catholic tradition, beliefs and practices using publicly acknowledged research criteria and allowing no differences between the religious sciences and other disciplines. In this case, it is because academic theology works in a critical way that it is questioned and even ignored by people in charge of pastoral care who claim that pious commitment is a better help to the Church than academic study.

Given this uncomfortable quandary, I would submit the following hypothesis: At first glance, theology cannot but acknowledge its

precarious status as a theoretical discourse with a basis in explicit responsibility and concern for the mission of the ecclesial body. Responsibility here does not mean the personal truthfulness of individual theologians in accomplishing their task. Responsibility, rather, is the most characteristic feature of Theology's epistemological status. Second, this apparently paradoxical status might prove not very different from that of other 'interpretative sciences' (or literary sciences) — provided one accepts the distinction between truth and accuracy.

My point is that, contrary to the scientific view that makes truth a matter of accuracy and objectivity, the *Doctrina Christiana* claim about Truth is that it reveals itself in the course of a trial in which what is at stake is a global stance towards the World as a whole. In a rather Nietzschean way: 'Faith is a matter of taste'. I will proceed as follows:

1. In a first part, 'Exegesis and Dogmatics: a fruitful conflict', I will reread the story of the quest for the historical Jesus.¹ My purpose is to show that through this harsh conflict, theology was led to overcome an objectivist definition of the truth of Revelation.
2. In a second part, I will make my point about how, according to the Gospel, Truth is on an endless trial.
3. My conclusion will outline how such an understanding of *Doctrina Christiana* puts theology and theologians themselves on trial.

I. Exegesis and Dogmatics: a fruitful conflict

In contemporary theology, the question of how to relate modern exegesis and dogmatic theology has been insightfully addressed by Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the CDF, in a paper entitled '*Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit*',² published while the Pontifical Biblical Commission was preparing a major text under his direction on the *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, generally seen as legitimating the use of modern critical methods in biblical studies. To some extent, Ratzinger's paper can be seen as a strong doctrinal commentary on the exegetical text, suggesting that

¹ Fifteen years ago it was the topic of my doctoral dissertation, *Jésus dans la théologie de Bultmann*, Desclée collection "Jésus/Jésus Christ", Paris 1993, which I explored further in diverse papers. For instance, see "La théologie aux prises avec l'historiographie" in collaboration with Jean-Louis Souletic, *Recherches de Science Religieuse* (83/4) 1995, pp. 557–583; "*Il est ressuscité, il n'est pas ici*", Le cas Jésus Christ, Pierre Gibert et Christoph Theobald (eds), Bayard Paris, 2002, pp. 323–352; "Le consensus christologique issu de la 'deuxième quête'", *Transversalités, Revue de l'Institut Catholique de Paris* (86) avril–juin 2003, pp. 1–17.

² *Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit. Zur Frage nach Grundlagen und Weg der Exegese heute*, Quaestiones Disputatae 117, Herder, Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 1989.

however fruitful modern exegesis has proved to be, it leaves many serious issues unresolved, so that it is still relevant to speak of interpretations in conflict, depending on whether they are dictated by principles of critical reason or in the light of Christian Revelation. Without describing at length Ratzinger's account of the nature of the conflict, let me come directly to his main argument, which can be summarised as a call for the self-critique of critical reason.

1. Towards self-criticism in critical exegesis

Ratzinger's main point is that critical reason, far from being neutral and objective and based simply on 'scientific principles', as claimed by most scholars, is actually dependent on a set of assumptions that are no less dogmatic than ecclesial ones. Consequently the dispute about interpretation is not an opposition between neutral sciences and uncritical dogmatic beliefs. On the contrary, so called critical exegesis is pervaded by Kantian or Lutheran assumptions that are usually not submitted to critical examination but merely taken for granted. That is why, according to the former Cardinal, its results leave the Catholic reader unsatisfied, not to say anxious. Therefore he sees it necessary to ask: what philosophical attitude is required of those who want to receive respectfully the text of Scripture according to its own self-understanding rather than to have it taken by something alien?

It is not my purpose to go into the details of Ratzinger's argument which I find rather convincing, even though it seems to me that the exegetical community is much more conscious than he suggests of the fundamental relationship between knowledge and interests, to put it in Habermas' words. I want to address the following question: if we accept that the harsh confrontation between critical exegesis and dogmatic theology was not an opposition between naked scientific truth and dark dogmatic assumptions – rather, that there were two sets of equally dogmatic and ideological assumptions — does that imply that critical exegesis is itself mere ideology? More positively: is there something really scientific in exegetical practices, however embedded they might be in practitioner assumptions and anticlerical strategies?³ To be frank, Ratzinger does not deny this. On the contrary, he recognises many times the fruitfulness of critical exegesis for the Church's mission, but probably in too vague a way so that more

³ By the way, the same question can be addressed to Milbank's understanding of how to relate theology and secular social theories.

detail is required. That is what I shall try by consideration of the tortuous story of 'the quest for the historical Jesus'.

2. *Critical exegesis as an island of rationality*

In his paper, Ratzinger refers to Albert Schweitzer's often quoted conclusion *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, which seemingly makes it clear that the first stage of the Jesus Quest, far from reaching definitive truth about Jesus' life and teaching, pictured him in very varied images whose common point was that each had an astonishing fit with its author's ideals: idealist exegetes pictured Jesus as an idealist Master of Wisdom, the Kantians as a moralist preacher, the revolutionaries as an enthusiastic activist, and so on. In the attempt to deliver an objective image of Jesus, they stripped him of whatever seemed incompatible with publicly accepted modern insights, and particularly of any ecclesiastical dogmatic burden. However, the resulting pictures were no less dogmatic than the previous ones. Although I am basically in agreement with this commonly accepted view of Schweitzer's conclusion, I wonder whether it takes sufficient account of what actually resulted from these past two centuries of tough debate.

Orthodox biblical scholars, facing the challenge of these diverse pictures of the historical Jesus by nineteenth-century liberal Protestants and agnostic humanists did not simply give up their so-called mythical interpretation of the Scriptures. Although often accused of merely appropriating their partners' epistemological, philosophical and (un)theological assumptions, they actually did something very different. Gradually, they tested the validity of those assumptions, subjecting them to rigorous examination by means of the text itself. This was the task of the 'second Quest', begun mostly by German Protestant scholars later in the twentieth-century. Using skills from various intellectual fields (archaeology, linguistics, comparative history, and so on), they showed how groundless was the usual picture of Jesus as the bearer of the highest values of modern humanism.

So, from the conflict that for almost two centuries set dogmatic Christologies in opposition to humanistic 'Jesus-ologies', critical exegesis gradually emerged as a sort of 'island of rationality', and forced the partners to the debate to test the validity of their assumptions and, to some extent, deepen them. In this academic forum, bringing together scholars from all backgrounds, it became impossible to express absolutely uncontrolled opinions

about Jesus and early Christianity. That was not an insignificant result!⁴

3. *Toward a new consensus in Christology*

As a result, the abstract picture of the ‘historical Jesus’ lost plausibility. The Galilean preacher of the Kingdom ceased to look like a modern European philosopher or theologian and retrieved his particularity of being of one time and one place. Moreover, the gap dissociating the preaching of Jesus from the preached Christ was bridged. Actually, it became more and more clear that, rather than falsifying the emancipating Gospel of the Kingdom by hiding it under a veil of myth and dogma, the Christological creed of early Christianity unfolded what was implied in Jesus’ announcement of the Kingdom.⁵ By confessing him after Easter as the Lord and Judge who was to come, the first Christian communities acknowledged him, beyond his death, as the one who had in full authority addressed to his disciples the words of eternal life, and enabled them to enter into the new age he announced. Fundamentally, the dogmatic beliefs of the paschal community unfolded what was implied in the confidence they placed in Jesus during his earthly mission.

If we look at it very closely, the quest for the historical Jesus appears to be a mess of contradictory hypotheses built up through unceasingly harsh polemics. But with the benefit of hindsight, one can see that it laid the basis for a renewed interpretation of the

⁴ Take an example. Scholars of the *Religionsgeschichteschule*, particularly W Bousset, held that the opposition between Hellenism and Judaism was the key point which made the New Testament and the history of primitive Christianity intelligible. On this basis they thought they could distinguish Palestinian apocalyptic Christianity, globally centred on waiting for the Son of Man, and a Hellenistic Christianity that confessed Jesus as the heavenly Lord, the *Κυριος Παντοκρατωρ*. In the latter case, Jesus was no longer the object of **expectant** waiting, but was worshipped as the raised Lord whose Spirit plunged the community into an ecstatic experience. Hence follows the commonplace that the dogmatisation of Christian beliefs, already attested to in the New Testament, is but the result of a hellenisation of the primitive Palestinian tradition. Consequently faithfulness to the original Gospel of the Kingdom preached by Jesus requires a de-dogmatisation, that is a de-hellenisation, of the Christian scriptures. But, with the passing of time, more accurate knowledge of the linguistic and archaeological data weakened these sharp and quite devastating affirmations of the pioneers. The thesis of the hellenisation of early Christianity vanished when it became clear that the Christological concepts of the New Testament are rooted principally in a Christian re-reading of what can be designated as **Old Testament Christology**. Put briefly, the Christology of the incarnation of the Word, the theology of the Eucharistic memorial, and so on, were much more rooted in Jewish theology than in esoteric Hellenistic traditions.

⁵ The idea that Jesus’ preaching and behaviour implies a Christology is paramount to the “second quest”. It appears first in Bultmann’s paper published in 1929, “Église et Enseignement dans le Nouveau Testament”, *Foi et Compréhension* I, pp. 173–210, see p. 193. See also p. 229, and *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, J C B Mohr, Tübingen, p. 44.

Christological tradition, able to face the challenging issues of well-informed historical inquiry. That task was undertaken in the second half of the twentieth-century and led to a global consensus. From Karl Barth to Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltman and Eberhard Jüngel on the Protestant side, from Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner to Walter Kasper not to say Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Catholic side, academic theologians, working in debate with scholars of the 'second Quest', retrieved a sense of historicity that had been lost under the influence of a narrow minded rationalism. Consequently, in Christological discourse as well as in preaching, the incarnate Word retrieved that full humanity which scholasticism had somehow reduced to a mere theologoumenon.

4. *Truth and accuracy*

Summarising briefly what is at stake in this rereading of two centuries of harsh arguments: the conflict of interpretations about Jesus opposed the dogmatic insights of two main streams of western culture, but was mediated by the gradual appearance of critical exegesis as it became an academic discipline in whose perspective dogmatic assumptions had to be submitted to a continuous process of objectification. According to this perspective, we have to reverse our understanding of biblical hermeneutics. It was taken for granted, in a very positivist way, that biblical hermeneutics begins with the historical moment, establishing the facts (the so called *bruta facta*), so that the properly interpretative moment follows in a second step, in order to explain the meaning of these facts on the basis of a jump into faith which the historian as such has no peculiar skills to appreciate. However according to the story I have told, the objectifying historical moment is actually a second moment. In the beginning there is a tradition of narratives and myths (no matter whether orthodox or heterodox) that are, properly, legends; that is, according to the etymology of the Latin, what is to be told – 'legendum est'.

In other words, meaning comes first! In the beginning the facts establish themselves in the form of meaningful narratives which give an historical shape to the chaos of events. It is only in a second moment that those 'legends' are critically examined in order to renew their reception. Actually, nobody goes off exploring a segment of history unless moved by deep interests and some pre-understanding of how his own present situation is at stake. This is especially the case with regard to Jesus, since he is a world-wide historical figure who determines the destiny of those who engage in a re-reading of his life and teaching, whatever their own religious background (Christian, Muslim, Jewish or atheist). However conscious they prove to be of their goals and assumptions, those who engage in

the Jesus quest are never neutral. I put it paradoxically: it is always 'fides' (Christian or not, religious or not) in quest of 'intellectum' that submits the Jesus' legend to critical inquiry. And its scientific character does not consist in the production of *the* historical truth in the form of an objective description of the naked facts, which are then abandoned to more concerned interpreters. Since truth is a not matter of observation but of appreciation, critical inquiry represents 'a moment of accuracy' which contributes to the process of truth but does not express the truth.

Actually, it is not part of the historian's brief 'objectively' to give a verdict for (or against) the truth of Jesus' destiny up to his death on the cross. This truth only the angel sitting on the stone which sealed the tomb can tell, in order to call the listener to a decision. Is the angel's word truth or lie? Critical exegesis is not able to decide. Nor is it any more able to decide whether the sentence 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Luke 6, 20) is a truth or a lie. All the resources of the academy (philology, history of traditions, and so on) can make the interpretation as accurate as possible, which certainly helps avoid dangerous mistakes. All of us here know well how the Church could be mistaken by inaccurate interpretations of the 'happy are the poor' beatitude. But history also teaches us that an accurate interpretation is not sufficient to restore truthfulness. According to the Gospel, truth is not a matter of accuracy, because it is involved in a trial which ultimately refers to a matter of taste. This is my second part.

II. 'Truth in trial'

1. *The sign of Jonah*

That truth is unavoidably *on (or 'in') trial* is stressed in a very provocative but enlightening way by H Schlier and H U von Balthasar. Schlier, a disciple of Bultmann who converted to Catholicism, once compared the critical exegetical perspective to Peter's attitude at Caesarea Philippi when he was unable to understand who Jesus really is.⁶ Similarly, von Balthasar suggested that whoever 'dissects the historical Jesus' is similar to the disciples who understood nothing about him before his cross and transfiguration.⁷ This comparison between critical exegetes and the unbelieving disciples is not mere provocation. It fits with the shift made by the scholars of the 'second quest of the historical Jesus', when they

⁶ "Zur Frage: Wer ist Jesus?" in J Gnllka (ed), *Neues Testament und Kirche*, Herder, Freiburg-Basel-Wien, p. 368.

⁷ *L'Heure de l'Église*, Fayard, Paris, 1982, p. 60.

highlighted how Jesus' claim to authority permeated his preaching and conferred on his actions an implicitly Christological character that was to be unfolded in terms of paschal faith. In other words, the Gospel stories are totally focused on this urgent need for a 'dogmatic' reply to the question Jesus himself asks: 'who do you say I am?'; and to the questions addressed to him: 'are you the one who is to come?', 'are you the king of the Jews?', etc.

If Jesus called people to take a stand with regard to himself, it was in so far as he asked them the question of the truth of their own lives, lives placed under the commandment which is at once the oldest and newest – that of love (1 John 2:7–8). The disciples received this commandment 'from the beginning', while their master displayed sovereign freedom⁸ in interpreting the received tradition. The figure of Jesus is therefore principally a figure 'on trial'.⁹ It is a trial focused on Jesus himself, according to whether he is confessed as Lord, or denied and executed. It is a trial focused on the listener, who is in turn either condemned or pardoned depending on whether he welcomes Jesus' questioning obediently or not. The whole Gospel account is presented as this trial whose contours John's Gospel outlines in a masterly way: 'he came to his own domain and his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him, to those who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God' (John 1:11–12)

For the Gospel narratives to be the object of a conflict of interpretation and appreciation is nothing new; there is nothing special about the contemporary epistemological context of hermeneutics. This is the necessary expression of the essence of the Gospel. Therefore, it is no wonder that historians cannot resolve these conflicts, even if they can shed light on their significance. It is hard to see how it could be otherwise, since already in his lifetime the meaning of Jesus' teaching and action was the subject of conflict. Since Jesus' preaching, in deeds as well as words, is the event which makes its listeners face the question of the truth of their lives, the Gospel narratives, which aim to recreate the event of the encounter with Jesus, cannot but open up such a conflict.

⁸ 'With unparalleled authority, Jesus was able to go both beyond the text of the Torah and the authority of Moses. . . . This sovereignty shook the foundations of late Judaism. . . .', E Käsemann, *Essais Exégétiques*, Delachaux et Nestlé, Neuchâtel, 1972, p. 167.

⁹ "In speaking of the 'trial of Jesus' we do not mean his trial in the narrow sense before the Sanhedrin or before Pilate, but the struggle for the truth of God in which he came forward as a witness; while from the other point of view, it refers to the 'trial about Jesus' in the judgment of God in which his witnesses speak up on his behalf. The expression moves from one significance to another, but this makes it more fertile. Behind its use lies the view that history is better understood in the categories of a legal trial and of a struggle for righteousness, life and freedom, than in naturalistic categories", J Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, SCM, London, 1974, p. 113f.

So, as Schlier and von Balthasar put it, insofar as critical exegetes consider it their duty to leave unanswered the question about truth which the whole of Jesus' existence addressed, one cannot help but think that they express, with unarguable sincerity, the point of view of the world when challenged by the point of view of God. They behave with as unarguable sincerity as Pilate asking 'what is truth?', then washing his hands without considering that this is precisely the question at stake in the present moment, the question he is dealing with as he decides the fate of its bearer. To postpone the answer required by the encounter with Jesus, while opening an academic debate about God's will and the signs of the times — was that not the unbelief of Jesus' listeners? They asked for probative signs, and so were unable to interpret the only sign they were given: the sign of Jonah.

2. A Truth to be fulfilled

And so, the trial that was and still is inspired by Jesus' entry into history does not depend primarily on the scrupulous accuracy of the information at our disposal about him. It depends much more on the empathy — ultimately spiritual — that we develop with the truth manifested in his entire existence up to the point of his death. That is why many of those who met him 'according to the flesh', possessing more information than we could ever dream of, nevertheless did not accept his call to faith. However accurate they may be, the presentation of the given facts can never dispense us from having to take a stand in the 'trial' initiated by reading the story. It is pointless to seek to 'know' the complete truth about Jesus unless one, in a very specific way, defines knowledge as encounter with the reality as a gift, rather than the grasp of it as a mere given. Truth in fact is not the object of some kind of informative knowledge but of the commitment of our freedom. It is not completed by more information, but is fulfilled (performed, realised, accomplished) in the life of the one who welcomes it

Speaking as I do of Christian truth as a 'truth in trial' that calls for an answer in an existential decision fits with very respectable theological discourse; for example, Joseph Ratzinger's definition of faith: 'faith is a form of taking a stance towards the whole of reality, irreducible to simple knowing and incommensurable with it.'¹⁰

This definition has two moments:

1. First, it fits with what I have said: faith belongs to a totally different order of knowledge, because it consists in a global stance (or attitude) of the self in response to the meaningfulness of the whole of life.

¹⁰ Mame Paris, 1969, p. 31f.

2. Secondly however, by insisting on considering the whole of reality, the definition opposes any arbitrary subjectivist dismissal of the definitive truth claim of Christian doctrine.

We will now examine these two moments, and how they are to be articulated with each other.

3. «*Interior instinctus et attractus doctrinae*»

In the good old days, before detraditionalisation, one could take for granted the cultural background that gave the *Doctrina Christiana* a kind of self-evident plausibility, and which made it so pervasive in every aspect of existence that one could become a Christian, as it were, in a silent move of acceptance of the given state of culture. In our post-modern time, however, one can no longer deny that Faith has once again become a matter of conscious decision. It is a decision made in the contingent conditions of historical experiences and encounters. The *Doctrina Christiana* undoubtedly delivers firm and universal affirmations about God as creator of heaven and earth and all they contain, but if these get assent it is not thanks to rational argument. It is rather because the ongoing ecclesial process of narratives, rituals and community practices leads those it still reaches and affects to bow down before the sign of Jonah, which is the love of the crucified Lord, and acknowledge the command to love which he fulfilled through his whole destiny as the word of eternal life.

From this point of view, faith is definitely a matter of taste; that is to say, the taste acquired through an ongoing process of initiation. To acquire and develop this taste for the true Life, this taste of what life is worth, is to reach what can be called a certainty, but a very peculiar one, as the parable of the poor Lazarus and the bad rich man suggests (Luke 16, 19–31). This parable describes the situation of the rich man suffering in the midst of hell fire and anxious about what will happen to his brothers if they do not convert. So he begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them. The answer Jesus puts in Abraham's mouth is as striking as it is provocative: 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead' (Luke 16, 31). It means that however objective and indisputable it might be, the appearance of a raised messenger would not be enough to give credibility to the message of conversion. Hard-hearted listeners would remain incapable of being moved by his word of mercy. Consequently they would not acknowledge the true nature of the raised messenger, and would say 'it's a ghost, we hallucinate', in the way that Jesus' contemporaries said, 'He does not come from God. He is the son of Joseph.'

Put more conceptually, that is what Pierre Rousselot suggested in his famous paper 'The Eyes of Faith',¹¹ where he stressed that, according to St Thomas, neither the *Doctrina Christiana* nor the miracles which support it could be significant without what he called an *interior instinctus et attractus doctrinae* or, in other words, *the inspiratio interna et experimentum*.¹² As Walter Kasper wrote referring to Barth and von Balthasar: if one comes to believe in the Gospel, it is thanks to the shining of the intimate splendour of the truth, thanks to the superior power of divine love's foolishness. When welcoming this splendour, they are led through the track of the cross beyond all their expectations to their total fulfilment.¹³ However, even though faith may rightly be designated a matter of taste, this does not reject its truth claim.

4. *A stance toward the World as a whole*

Describing Faith as a matter of taste makes us conscious of its precarious and contingent character. Coming to faith depends upon a fragile decision based upon an aesthetic judgement rather than the kind of certainty nurtured by objective information and subtle dialectics. And yet, it is a decision which makes a claim concerning the truth of the world as a whole, as we saw in the second part of Ratzinger's sentence that I quoted.

As Walter Kasper reminds us in *Theology and the Church*, a theology which speaks about God as the ultimate reality determining and encompassing everything cannot develop a soteriology without considering the doctrine of Creation; nor a theology of history without addressing the ontological question of Being. However, referring to the properly metaphysical dimension of the *Doctrina Christiana*, even in Greek concepts, is simply being consequent with what is implied in the confession, according to the Scriptures, of Jesus Christ as Lord. At first, this designates his destiny, in a very existentialist way, as the fulfilment of every individual human destiny; but it goes beyond this to consider him Lord of the World, as an historical as well cosmic reality. That is a point Käsemann stressed fiercely against Bultmann's existential reductionism, recalling how realistically the New Testament writers, and particularly Paul, take into account the cosmic dimension of salvation.¹⁴

However, the fact that the *Doctrina Christiana* expresses a strong truth claim, which finds appropriate expression in ontological propositions, does not mean that one comes to faith on the basis of philosophical certainty acquired under the pressure of compelling

¹¹ *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, I, 1919, p. 241–259, 444–475.

¹² *In Joh.*, c.6, 1.4, n.7; c.15, 1.5, n.5.

¹³ See Walter Kasper, *Dogme et Évangile*, p. 42.

¹⁴ *Paulinischen Perspektiven*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1968, p. 177.

arguments. This is something that antifoundationalists rightly stress.¹⁵ After all, it is more likely to be the persuasive art of rhetoric than the demonstrative power of dialectics that will make someone bow before the sentence ‘happy are the poor’ accomplished in the flesh of the crucified Lord. This is the bold suggestion of John Milbank in his debate with Alasdair MacIntyre about the difference between pagan and Christian virtues. He stresses that for the Fathers as for the medieval theologians, the beliefs that found ethics were not dialectically deduced but ‘rhetorically instilled’.¹⁶

According to Milbank, the clash between Christianity and paganism (in its ancient or contemporary ‘nihilistic liberal’ versions) puts dramatically at stake two incommensurable ontologies, between which one must make a choice. But on what basis can this choice be made? Milbank’s answer is the following: ‘MacIntyre wants to argue against this stoic liberal-nihilist tendency which is “secular reason”. But *my* case is rather that it is only a *mythos*, and therefore cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated, if we can *persuade* people – for reasons of “literary taste” – that Christianity offers a much better story.’¹⁷ In other words, the believer is one who has been seduced by the splendour of truth. But however aesthetic his choice may appear, it cannot be reduced to an arbitrary personal choice or blind obedience to the canons that rule the community, and consequently escape critical appreciation. To acknowledge that faith is a matter of taste does not imply agreeing with the lazy pluralistic formula that whispers ‘*de coloribus et gustibus non disputandum*’, assuming that only objective knowledge is worth disputing. On the contrary, because they know that this assumption is the typical disguise of unbelief in our post-modern times, whose idolatry appears in the form of ethical polytheism, believers cannot but reply ‘*de gustibus disputandum est*’. In that perspective, the *Doctrina Christiana* is especially devoted to discussing matters of taste in a world that refuses to make these public affairs.

However, what kind of theological reasoning is appropriate to engage in disputation over matters of taste? This will be my conclusion.

III. Conclusion: theology and theologians on trial

Post-liberal theology discourages us from trying to re-engage the *Doctrina Christiana* in the public debate by the re-establishment of commonly accepted philosophical foundations. It calls instead for an intra-systemic criterion: theology has to be content to check continuously whether or not it is responding to the *Doctrina Christiana*

¹⁵ See William C Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, John Knox Press, Westminster, 1989, pp. 24–35.

¹⁶ *Theology and Social Theory, beyond Secular Reason*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 328.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

according to its own principles. To put it crudely: Do we really profess Christian faith in a Christian way?

The assumption is that, as members of the Church, we are rooted in faith, but that as such we always need to rebuild the truthfulness and faithfulness of our discipleship by checking the coherence between our deeds and words. If I had enough time, it would not be too difficult to show that this task is one of classical systematic or dogmatic theology. This has to mobilise the resources of the religious sciences to ensure that the dogmas, patterns and institutions which give shape and effectiveness to Christian life truly express the conditions of authentic faithfulness to the command of love as manifested by Jesus in the whole of his destiny, even though they are also a result of historical circumstances.

But, is it not too much 'ad intra', even sectarian, for theology to take for granted that there is a consensus about 'taste'? Of course it may be the case within the believing community. However, does theology only have to reflect on the situation of the community without concern for what happens outside? Doing so, does it take seriously enough the current situation of Western post-Christian countries described in the leaflet for this conference? I quote: 'What is at issue is . . . a sense that our contemporary culture has become so disengaged from the language and symbols of Christianity that it is becoming impossible either to hear or to speak the Christian message in a way that makes sense.' Addressed in this radical way, the issue seems to invite 'those sent as preachers and teachers' to escape the so called Barthian circle, in order to provide the languages and symbols of Christianity with new resources of credibility, thus enabling them to make sense anew. I would suggest, in a rather different way, that to engage in conversation with our post-Christian companions about what *Doctrina Christiana* affirms, we do not need other criteria than those intra-systemic ones that we use to ensure and rebuild the truthfulness and faithfulness of Christian discipleship. The assumption here is that as human beings we are rooted in love, but that as such we always have to rebuild the truthfulness and faithfulness of 'love's discipleship', checking the coherence between our deeds and words. Let me develop this point.

If, as Augustine suggested, love is really what the journey of faith, and particularly the reading of Scripture, is all about,¹⁸ then the most central Christian faith issues cannot be dissociated from the most central issues of daily life, whether or not in the latter case they are based on religious concerns. At first glance, love, as energising our common desire to be happy, can be taken as the common basis for any conversation about the truth of life. But it is a very ambiguous basis! Actually, the question about love is not how it determines our lives — the Beatles taught us the answer: 'all we need is love'. If we really had it, it would be our God; but we do not, so it is not. Love can be deceptive; at least apparently so. Was

¹⁸ *De Doctrina Christiana*, I, 36–41, 44.

it not the case for Jesus as he died facing the silence of his Father and abandoned by his disciples? In fact, love can make our existence, or our neighbours', absolute hell. Are not incest and nationalism peculiar ways of 'wrong loving', leading to death?

But where is the coach (the rabbi, the guru, if you prefer) able to train us 'rightly', to truly love? This is why Feuerbach was wrong. Love is not our God. And this is why homilies and pastoral practices do not make sense when their only aim is to excite our desire for love without providing us with the necessary 'skills'. Actually, the question about love is how to deal with it so that it proves to be trustful and not deceptive. And that is what the Gospel is about: to put our loves in trial, while confronting them with this unique love that God has given us in sending his Son.

Consequently, to speak the Christian message in a way that makes sense puts theology itself on trial, because it requires it to ensure that Christian narrative, liturgical and community social practices are truly about nothing but love. Teaching Creation, Trinity, Sacraments and Ministries (all that, not just morality!) — is it really teaching how love proves to be trustworthy? Or, is this to teach supplementary truths, demanding supplementary obedience over and above the love command which entails the whole law?

Here I have to make myself clear. By no means do I contend that we have to re-interpret all dogmatic statements in the light of our modern humanist — not to say Feuerbachian — vision of the essence of love, so as to make them more acceptable to the spirit of our time. On the contrary, what we have to do is establish how all dogmatic statements, understood in the light of the tradition, are oriented to interpreting the Gospel as that which puts our modern humanist vision of love on trial — in order that it match up to this unique Love.

Finally, those sent as preachers and teachers are also on trial. To say that the truth is not the object of some kind of informative knowledge, but a truth to be believed in, means that it can only be delivered by witnesses. Witnesses: that is, those who speak from the scars left on their bodies when they have paid the price for this truth; which they would never proclaim had they not welcomed it in their flesh, and had they not tasted it as sweet as honey in their mouth before feeling it bitter in their stomach. A truth they may well have experienced as judging, not to say crushing, them.

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