

GAMALIEL

GAM. I've a bone to pick with you, Ed. Within a month of your so indiscreetly publishing that conversation of ours, I received no less than eighteen questions.

ED. My—we *did* succeed in priming the oracle's pump. Nothing for you to worry about, then, for at least another year. Come and have another conversation next September. Good morning.

GAM. But I may not be here next September. I cannot be sure your successor will keep me on.

ED. No, I don't suppose you can. Well, you had better get on with answering as many as possible now, instead of wasting my time picking bones.

GAM. I was going to suggest you might help me with some of them—a sort of two-man Brains Trust; discussing the questions rather than just answering them.

ED. Sorry, old man, but *you* are the oracle. That's what you are employed for. I have my own work to do. *Good* morning.

GAM. Well, one question does concern you rather personally. 'I have been taught', says my correspondent, who lives in Pennsylvania, 'that it is sinful to take the name of God in vain; this means, I understand, using his name in a frivolous manner. Yet on page 124 of the August-September issue the editor does, it appears to me, use God's name frivolously. Can you explain to me how it is not sinful to use God's name as it was there used?' Can *you* explain, Ed.? The words complained of are: 'My God, Gamaliel, if you mix such a metaphor again, I'll fire you'.

ED. Oh. —Er, yes—. Um. But da—, I mean, Oh Lor—. Well, dearie me.

GAM. Come on; was it sinful or not?

ED. No, dash it—I mean, certainly not.

GAM. You're unrepentant?

ED. I'll grant it may have been indiscreet—

GAM. Not in the best of taste, perhaps?

ED. That's arguable, though I wouldn't agree.

GAM. But definitely not a sin against the second commandment?

ED. Definitely not. Absolutely not. Your correspondent's attitude reduces the second commandment to an utterly trivial level—to use a favourite word of yours. What it is forbidding,

I would say, is the use of God's name for such purposes as magical incantations, or swearing oaths you do not intend to keep.— And I *did* fire you.

GAM. But we have our Lord's saying about idle words to show that God is not too grand to take even trivial sins into account, just as he is not too grand to acknowledge even trivial good works. My correspondent is only wondering if you may not have committed a trivial breach of a commandment, and is clearly surprised that you should have been so thoughtless as to commit it in print.

ED. But I just don't agree that 'vanity' in the Bible, the idea expressed in the phrase 'taking God's name *in vain*', has anything to do with triviality, or even frivolity. It is applied to such things as idols, and the utterances of false prophets, and a worthless sort of life. We are forbidden to treat God's name as worthless, or in a worthless fashion.

GAM. Well, isn't the frivolous use of something as sacred as God's name a worthless action? Let's look at the text, Exodus xx, 7: 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that shall take his name in vain'. Doesn't that second sentence strike you as intended precisely to meet the sort of defence you are putting up, that such a trivial thing doesn't really matter?

ED. Possibly. But the text also suggests another defence. What is God's name that we are forbidden to take in vain? Not the word 'God', which is no more God's name than the words 'editor' or 'man' are my names. 'Yahweh' is the name (translated 'the Lord' in our Bibles) which the Israelite is forbidden to treat as worthless or cheap.

GAM. If you interpret the commandment as strictly as that, it will make it as obsolete as the name 'Yahweh' itself for the modern Christian.

ED. No. I am merely saying that the commandment, as it stands, is concerned with proper reverence for God's *personal* name, and that the word 'God' is not his personal name. The Israelites, at least of the later post-exilic period, came to treat the name 'Yahweh' with what I think we can call such exaggerated reverence that they never pronounced it at all, but said 'Adonai' (Lord) instead, whenever they read the sacred name in the text. Hence our translations, and God's loss of a personal proper name.

GAM. But then the new testament has practically transferred the

title 'Lord' to *our* Lord, who certainly has got a proper personal name.

ED. Quite. And I would say that the reverence which the Israelites were commanded to have for the name 'Yahweh' has been transferred by Christians to the name of 'Jesus'. Jesus is our Yahweh. His name is the name of the Lord our God incarnate.

GAM. So if instead of using the phrase 'my God' in the way you did, you had used the name of Jesus, you agree that it would have been irreverent, and a breach of the commandment?

ED. Yes, certainly. That would, I feel, have been cheapening something personally dear, something sacred in itself.

GAM. Whereas the word 'God', as distinct of course from God himself, is not specially sacred or holy, any more than the word 'holy' is itself a holy thing.

ED. Precisely.

GAM. Well, that's that question settled. Personally, I acquit you. Here's the list of questions. Pick another.

ED. I suppose I am committed to your Brains Trust now. This one looks fairly easy. 'Why does St Paul, writing to Timothy, say that money is the root of all evil?'

GAM. From a convent of Dominican nuns who sent seven questions in all.

ED. They are obviously probing for the chink in your armour.

GAM. I suppose one assumption at least that prompts the question is that the basic sin, according to the central core of theological tradition, is pride.

ED. And another would be that in itself money, like anything else that exists, is a good thing, and its possession morally neutral.

GAM. The difficulty there is easily answered, because what the Apostle actually says is '*Love* of money is the root of all evils'. If I am not mistaken, it was a popular music-hall song of some years ago that misquoted his words in the form of the Sisters' question.

ED. Glory be to God!—That's not taking his name in vain, is it?—Evidently a nun who has shaken the dust of the boards off her feet. To deal with the difficulty raised by the first assumption, though, we had better examine the context of St Paul's remark.

GAM. Yes, of course. I Timothy vi, 10, the reference is. We might get over the difficulty by observing that in the original Greek the definite article does not appear where the English puts

it, and does appear where it is not used in the English. Literally translated it runs: 'For root of all the evils is money-love'. So perhaps St Paul is only saying that this vice is *a* root of all the evils he is considering here, not *the* (one and only) root of all evils whatsoever.

ED. No, that's just quibbling. No two languages use the definite article in the same way. But St Paul is clearly not writing Timothy a systematic treatise of moral theology, with the vices appropriately graded in order of magnitude and mutual causality. He happens to be talking about attitudes to money-making and wealth. Some people, he says in verse 5, think gain equals godliness; whereas in fact godliness with contentment equals great gain. And actually the desire for riches involves men in serious losses, spiritual losses of all sorts. As a matter of practical experience it is the root of all the ills of the men affected by it, because it jeopardizes their salvation, entangling them in harmful desires, plunging them in destruction and perdition, involving them in loss of faith and many sorrows. He is making a practical observation, not laying down a universal principle of morals.

GAM. But the same might be said of all the moral teaching of scripture almost without exception. Ecclesiasticus x, 15 has another practical observation to make—that pride is the beginning of all sin. It is precisely the function of the moral theologian to co-ordinate these practical observations in a scheme of coherent principles.

ED. We are clearly about to introduce St Thomas.

GAM. Naturally. 'We must consider', he says (*Summa Theol.* Ia-IIae, q. 84, a. ii), 'that in all deliberate acts, such as sins are, there is a double sequence to be found, of intention and of execution. In the intention sequence it is the goal intended that has the function of a starting point, as has been stated time and again. The goal intended in the (selfish) acquisition of all temporal goods is that they should give a man a sort of private perfection and superiority. And so from this point of view it is pride, which is the appetite for superiority, that is called the beginning of sin. But from the point of view of execution, what comes first is what provides the opportunity of fulfilling all sinful desires, which has the function of a root [because it feeds the desires as roots feed a tree], and that is riches. And so from this point of view avarice is called the root of all evils.' So there you are; pride comes first in

intention, avarice in execution—which makes pride, absolutely speaking, senior to avarice.

ED. Right. Let's have another question.

GAM. Here is the *Catholic Teachers Journal* for September writing, 'It would be interesting to have a theologian's opinion on the efficacy of the mass on those in the overcrowded chairless hall, with its enormous physical obstacles to recollected prayer, who are present for the sole reason that they have been marched in with their class'.

ED. What has the *Catholic Teachers Journal* to do with you?

GAM. The editor kindly sent it for *my* opinion. Flattering, isn't it? Have *you* a theological opinion on the subject?

ED. All my *instincts* are against the church parade system in any shape or form. But elucidate the context a little.

GAM. The editorial is discussing the issue of compulsory attendance at week-day school mass. This may surprise you: 'Who would deny the wisdom of making attendance at week-day school mass compulsory rather than voluntary for ten-year-olds, and probably for twelve-year-olds as well?' So schoolmasters are agreed that experience warrants church parades for little boys and girls.

ED. 'Suffer little children to come unto me' is interpreted 'Compel little children to come unto me', eh?

GAM. That is probably a very unfair crack. In any case, the editorial goes on: 'When we come to fifteen-year-olds, do the same considerations apply?'

ED. Should religion be compulsory or voluntary? I feel there is a shortage of terms, don't you? I don't mean in that editorial particularly, but in the way this sort of issue is generally presented.

GAM. Expound.

ED. Well, there is no doubt that religion, if it is to be the genuine article at all, should be *willing*. But that does not mean the same thing as voluntary, because it is also a matter of duty or *obligation*.

GAM. Very true. And on the one hand there are obligations which a person need not, or indeed cannot, be *compelled* to fulfil; while on the other there is such a thing as the willing performance of compulsory activities.

ED. Now let's apply all this to the subject on which our opinion is asked.

GAM. On which *my* opinion is asked, let me remind you. Well

then, attendance at mass, even obligatory attendance at Sunday mass, has to be *willing* attendance, in order to be a religious act at all, having any religious value. If it isn't that, if it is just a case of the little horrors happening to be in the same room where mass is being said, then they aren't really attending mass at all, and the mass is having no more efficacy on them than it is having on other little horrors out in the playground. What efficacy it does have on them depends on the intentions of the celebrant and those who are really attending, that is, willingly taking part in the mass as an act of worship, offering it in some sort with the priest. But the physical presence of the objects of these pious intentions is quite accidental and superfluous.

ED. The priest does make a memento of *omnium circumstantium*, of all who are actually present, so perhaps mere presence does secure for a person that he is included among those for whom the mass is offered.

GAM. But the canon continues about these *circumstantes, quorum tibi fides cognita est et nota devotio*; and while the boys swapping stamps at the back of the hall doubtless have some sort of *faith*, by definition there is no *devotio* there if they are not willingly attending mass. They are simply not taking part in the act of worship, and so as an act of worship it does them no good. They might just as well not be there; indeed, they had much better not be there. We ought to avoid thinking of the efficacy of the mass as a sort of supernatural X-ray, which acts on anybody, more or less, within reach of the altar.

ED. I am glad to see you supporting my anti-church parade instincts up to the hilt. What about compulsory attendance at Sunday mass? Presumably most children of good Catholic parents are taken, or sent, to mass on Sundays without being left any choice in the matter. Would you object to their being punished if they are found to have played truant and gone fishing instead?

GAM. I would say people should only be *compelled* by sanctions to perform their obligations under one or other of these two conditions; first, if the obligatory act is of some value and significance whatever the frame of mind of the person performing it. For example, if I refuse to pay my debts willingly, there is no harm in applying compulsion to make me, because a debt paid, willingly or resentfully, is a debt paid and that's that. But an act of worship can only be performed willingly; the obligation to

attend mass is the obligation to attend it willingly. And so secondly, when it is a case of this sort of obligation, compulsion can only be justified if there is reason to suppose that it will act as an external inducement to the willing performance of it.

ED. I suppose that would be the case with young children; they are amenable to compulsory forms of persuasion. Make going to mass voluntary or optional, and they probably won't go; make it compulsory and they go quite happily.

GAM. I imagine some such experience lies behind the idea of church parades for the ten-year-olds; whereas in the fifteen-year-olds the spirit of contradiction is burgeoning strongly, and they do not readily co-operate with obvious forms of compulsion.

ED. But in all cases, you will agree, compulsion ought to be subordinated to instruction, direction, and an effort to arouse the interest of those who are being compulsorily dragooned. It is a matter of school and church authorities and parents constantly remembering the subordination of external observance to inward disposition, that is to *devotion*, and of their making their charges aware of this subordination.

GAM. Certainly. But how that is to be done I think we can leave to the technicians of pedagogy, don't you? How about another question?

ED. I don't think there is enough space. But you might broach one for us to brood over till next month.

GAM. Here's one we might consider. A lady writes from Oxford 'to ask a question which was really put by Miss Marghanita Laski in some Brains Trust on the radio. I can't be certain of putting it exactly, but she asked for a distinction between "soul" and "spirit", and wanted to know how to define "mind".'

ED. Good. In our last conversation we only considered Sir Julian Huxley's remarks about the god-theory. This will give us a chance of tackling his observations on the soul-theory of Christian theology.

GAM. It will have to be from memory, because I bet you won't have kept a copy of the relevant *Observer*. But I look forward, Ed., to a last conversation with you before you are finally fired. Goodbye.