

Unsafe Premises: a reply to Nicholas Lash

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Experts and others

In his reply to my article, 'A Remarkable Consensus', Professor Lash displays what appears to me an undue inclination to suppose that only the opinions of experts matter or are to be heard. Thus he asks why, 'since Hans Küng is not a New Testament scholar', I did not cite 'the views of those experts on whom Küng relies', rather than those of Küng himself. My article was, in part, about the fact, or alleged fact, that a certain cluster of views concerning religion is prevalent amongst the Catholic clergy. Had I asserted that Küng held those views, it would obviously have been relevant: whether, in forming them, he was interpreting the Biblical experts he had read correctly or incorrectly was quite beside the point. If Küng's Christological views can be dismissed as unimportant on the ground that he is not enough of an expert, then certainly those of the vast mass both of clergy and laity can be dismissed as even less important. In that case, Professor Lash would have had to hand an easy rebuttal of my argument: namely, that it simply does not matter what all those millions of theological incompetents believe, one way or the other.

Missing the point

I do not, of course, suppose that Professor Lash really thinks that the beliefs of ordinary clergy and laity do not matter. His misplaced complaint springs, rather, from a misunderstanding of the purpose of my article. That purpose was not a critical examination of recent opinions advanced by New Testament exegetes, either of their intrinsic plausibility or even of their consonance with the Catholic faith. Had it been, I should indeed have had to cite the original formulations by those exegetes, perhaps noting possible distortions of their views that had gained currency among theologians. I was concerned, rather, with a report that certain theses said to be derived from the work of Biblical exegetes were now taught as a matter of course in Catholic seminaries. It was very much to my purpose to indicate why holding such theses appears to me to make nonsense of belonging to the Catholic Church, but not to discuss them in any other light, or to ask how faithful they are

558

to the views of the exegetes themselves.

Mistaking my purpose, Professor Lash seems more irritated by what he takes to be my unscholarly procedure than by any actual or implied inaccuracy. He does not tell us, for example, that the views attributed by Sheehan to Küng are *not* faithful to those of the exegetes from whom he derived them: he merely complains that I did not enquire whether they were. Likewise, he asks why, 'if it was necessary to drag Hans Küng into the discussion', his views 'could not have been quoted at first hand'. It should have been clear that I was not criticising Küng, and passed no judgement on the accuracy of Sheehan's citation of his opinions: but I did not 'drag him in', either. The piece by Sheehan which I quoted was, as I stated, a review of a book by Küng. It took the form of a proclamation of a 'liberal consensus' allegedly subscribed to by virtually all contemporary Catholic Biblical scholars and seminary teachers, and illustrated by the book by Küng under review. Some purported constituents of this consensus therefore appeared, in the review, as contained in Küng's book: I had to cite these in order to convey what this 'consensus' comprised. I did not assert that Küng in fact held these views: whether he did or not was inessential to the point I was making in the article. Professor Lash does not say that Küng does not hold them, but merely deplores my failure to raise the question: in doing so, he appears to have missed the point.

Professor Lash reports Thomas Sheehan as having actually drawn, in a subsequent book, the conclusion which I urged follows from the theses comprising the alleged consensus, namely that 'the entire history of Christianity has been a deception and mistake', and demands indignantly why I should take a proponent of such a view as a guide to the state of Catholic seminary teaching. I fail to see why the repugnance Professor Lash and I both feel for some of Sheehan's theological views should cast doubt on his veracity on a matter of fact. Everyone is apt, of course, unintentionally to exaggerate the extent of support given to views he favours and believes to be in the ascendant, and I had allowed for that: but I see no reason to suspect that Sheehan, a Professor at a Catholic university, was talking completely through his hat. In fact, I know, from contacts I have had with clergy in the United States and Britain, from sermons I have heard and articles I have read, that he cannot be, at least about opinions prevalent among the clergy; it is intrinsically improbable that seminaries are not a main source of those views, though I confess to having no direct knowledge on the point. Here, again, Professor Lash refrains from directly controverting Sheehan's assertion. He does not assure us that the 'liberal consensus' is taught only in very few seminaries, or even only in a large minority of them: he merely berates me for citing Sheehan instead of carrying out a statistical survey. 'Professor Dummett believes', he writes, 'that ... 'in

most Catholic seminaries'' opinions are taught which I stigmatised as amounting to apostasy. I asserted no such thing: the words he puts in quotation marks are taken from my résumé of Sheehan's review. Professor Lash has no warrant to attribute such a belief to me, and I should like to assure him that it is not my practice to hint at what I flinch from stating. I have no idea how far Sheehan was exaggerating, and expressed none. My article would indeed have been pointless had I not supposed, and said, that the 'consensus' is accepted by a large and important section within the Church, particularly among the clergy, including significantly many seminary teachers. How large it is, I do not profess to know.

I should be happy if someone in a position to know could declare my supposition to be in error: but of that Professor Lash offers no reassurance. The closest he comes is to commend the work of Fr. Raymond Brown, whose judiciousness, he says, has made him widely respected in seminaries as elsewhere. Among many other publications, Fr. Brown is well known for a lecture (published in *Theological Studies*, Vol. 33, 1972, pp. 3—34) on 'The Problem of the Virginal Conception of Jesus', a subject to which he has devoted various subsequent writings. The lecture was indeed judicious: but it left it as an unresolved problem, requiring serious further examination, whether or not we are required to believe that Mary was a virgin when she conceived Jesus, and whether or not she was. I should feel considerably happier, but far from wholly relieved, to be told that Fr. Brown's lecture better represents what is taught to seminarians than does Professor Sheehan's review; but Professor Lash does not come close to telling us even that. I will revert to the matter below.

The apostasy of which I spoke is not, of course, conscious: I did not question anyone's sincerity in remaining a Catholic while adhering to the 'consensus'. The appeal to literary genres in interpreting Scripture was in origin well based; but, in my view, it has degenerated by imperceptible steps into an unconscious mechanism for allowing the exegete to adopt what opinions he chooses while formally professing to acknowledge the truthfulness and inspiration of the New Testament writings. A literary genre, for instance the fictionalised biography, normally rests on a widely known convention; the rare examples of a completely novel genre depend upon the provision of strong clues to the author's intention. The habit has grown up of assigning the Gospels, in particular, to a genre to which there is no evidence whatever, or even any plausibility in supposing, that contemporaries understood those or any other writings as belonging; the sole function of this is to ascribe to them a sense consonant with the exegete's opinions without branding them deliberately deceptive. I did not say, as Professor Lash alleges, that those addicted to this habit have 'regular recourse to tricks', which would

imply conscious dishonesty. I think the device is objectively dishonest; I do not doubt that it is subjectively sincere.

Sequiturs and non-sequiturs

There are, very properly, limits to Professor Lash's respect for experts. He convicts me of incompetence not only in his area of expertise, but also in my own, namely logic, denouncing my arguments against three items of the consensus as non-sequiturs. In replying, I am forced to spell out what, taking it as fairly obvious, I expressed in a single sentence.

I said 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 that we cannot claim to know what he taught. The earliest occurrences of the phrase in the first two synoptic Gospels, which must surely be intended to guide the reader in understanding its reference in later passages, are:

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).

'But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' — he said to the paralytic, 'I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home'. (Mk. 2:10—11).

St. Luke likewise gives the story of the paralytic first; two chapters later we have:

'For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, "He has a demon". The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, "Behold a glutton and a drunkard"'. (Lk. 7:33—4).

None of these passages makes the slightest sense if we construe it as representing Jesus as referring to an apocalyptic figure yet to come. All three synoptic gospels make Jesus use the phrase in prophesying the Passion (Mt. 17:22, 20:18; Mk. 8:31, 9:31, 10:33; Lk. 9:22, 9:44, 18:31). St. John puts in Jesus's mouth the words:

'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life'. (Jn. 6:53—4).

St. Matthew has Jesus reply, at the climax of the trial before Caiaphas, when he is put on oath to say if he is the Christ, the Son of God:

'You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven'. (Mt. 26:64).

On this, the high priest rent his robes, and said, 'You have heard his blasphemy: what further need do we have of witnesses?'. What

blasphemy could there be in merely repeating the prophecy of Daniel?

Professor Lash tells us that my reading of the New Testament is 'flat-footed and anachronistic': plainly, I have failed to understand the literary genre, in accordance with which the Evangelists intended to convey to their readers that Jesus frequently used the phrase 'the Son of Man', but never as referring to himself. If Christians had *subsequently* identified the Son of Man of whom he spoke with Jesus himself, that would have been an important discovery for them: the contention seems to me quite implausible in view of the fact that the phrase hardly occurs in the New Testament outside the Gospels. However this may be, I cannot see how one can dismiss as a non-sequitur the conclusion that, in many important passages, Jesus's words have been garbled, even if the garbling occurred deliberately in the service of a literary convention too opaque for us to do more than make tenuous guesses about how it was supposed to work. And, if his words have been garbled in these passages, how can we tell in which other passages they have not been garbled? We may offer conflicting conjectures: but how can we possibly claim to *know* what he taught?

Secondly, I claimed that, if Jesus did not believe himself divine, we can have no ground for doing so. Professor Lash comments that my argument implies 'that the Church should only canonise ... those who believe themselves to be ... holy'. Though he grants that the divinity of Christ is not to be equated with the holiness of his life, his analogy indicates that he fails to perceive how vast is the gulf between the two propositions. I readily agree that neither Nicaea nor Chalcedon made any pronouncement about what Jesus believed: my argument was that, unless we suppose that he knew that he was God, we have no reason to accept what those Councils did say. To decide whether someone displayed heroic virtue, we have only to reflect on the facts of his or her life: but no amount of such reflection could justify the astonishing conclusion that a man *was* God, through whom all things were made. I might reply that, if Jesus was God, then he knew whatever God knows, including who he himself was: but I am well aware of the great difficulty of explaining the relation between divine and human knowledge as possessed by our Lord, and assume that Professor Lash was speaking only of his human knowledge. My point was, rather, that, while reflection on a man's life might perhaps lead one to conclude that he had been the promised Messiah, even if he had made no such claim, nothing could possibly warrant, still less have appeared to Jews to warrant, the conclusion that, although indeed a man, he was also almighty God — unless all other conclusions were ruled out; and that only his having himself made that claim could rule them out. Of course, the mere making of the claim does not guarantee its truth. After all, it is a known delusion of the insane, and so a conviction that Jesus was not deluded, but,

562

rather, the Christ of God, was required to rule out the most obvious alternative conclusion. Such a supplementary conviction could have been arrived at by reflection on his personality and his life. But to go beyond that and regard him as incarnate God would have been preposterous unless stopping at that point was impossible: and nothing could have made it impossible save his having manifested the knowledge that he was incarnate God. Only by watering down the content of the doctrine that he was incarnate God until the words have become wildly inappropriate to the content could one think otherwise; or so it seems to me.

Much the same holds good of the Trinity, of which, I claimed, Jesus was aware. I am surprised at Professor Lash's attributing to me of the view that our Lord 'had to hand ... an Aramaic concept which would conveniently render into Greek as *homoousios*': does he think that no-one can be said to believe in the Trinity if he does not have to hand such a word or phrase? The doctrine of the Trinity notoriously strikes those not disposed to accept it as violating the principle of monotheism. Nevertheless, I did not mean to argue that no-one could have dreamed up the idea that there must be at least two Persons in the Godhead as a way of explaining the doctrine of the Incarnation that he had already accepted: my argument was that, in such a case, we should have no ground to treat it as more than a tenuous speculative hypothesis. It might *seem* to some the intellectual price to be paid for accepting the Incarnation: but it would seem equally strongly to others that rejecting a plurality of divine Persons was the necessary price for maintaining the unity of God.

There are two possibilities: that it is not possible consistently to believe that Christ was God without recognising two Persons in the Godhead; and that it would be possible. In the first case, if our Lord asserted his own divinity, he, too, must have recognised (at least) two divine Persons, and, at least implicitly, have so taught. If, on the other hand, Christ did not assert his own divinity, then anyone subsequently forming the hypothesis that he was divine would have found himself compelled to acknowledge two divine Persons; and the intrinsic difficulty of this conclusion ought then to have led him to withdraw the hypothesis that Christ actually was God. In the second case, belief in Christ's divinity does not require us to distinguish the Second from the First Person: and so no reflection would justify our doing so. Thus, in all cases, we could have no valid ground for believing so extraordinary a doctrine as the Trinity, let alone making it an integral part of Christian teaching, unless Jesus knew that fact concerning God and said enough for us to come to understand him as communicating it. Professor Lash gives no hint what subject it could be, other than the recorded words of Christ, reflection on which would entitle one to advance the proposition that the Spirit is a third divine Person.

The reason Professor Lash rejects my arguments about the Incarnation and the Trinity as non-sequiturs must lie, I think, in his supposing the Church to have been throughout the ages the recipient of new revelations. Development, for him, is not the drawing out of more explicit consequences from a set of data, but the addition to those data of 'fresh certainties', which I take to be newly revealed truths. Acceptance of such truths is a matter of faithfulness to the Spirit who reveals them: it need not be a condition for rationally maintaining the old truths. This is not the traditional understanding of our Lord's promise as recorded in Jn. 14:26, and seems to me a dangerous one: but perhaps Professor Lash will stop accusing me of reasoning fallaciously when he realises that in this, too, my views are 'anachronistic'.

In commending the judiciousness of Father Brown, Professor Lash perhaps means to indicate that he likes my expression of assurance that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is true no more than Sheehan's assurance that it is false. In the lecture referred to above, Fr. Brown advances various suasions, on one side and the other. The doctrine appears guaranteed by the ordinary magisterium, in view of the long and steadfast adherence to it: but it needs investigation whether it is the kind of doctrine that either the magisterium or Scripture can guarantee. Perhaps Sts. Matthew and Luke derived their information from an unreliable source; perhaps they were advancing a (theologically unsound) explanation of Jesus's being the Son of God in virtue of his having been conceived by the Holy Spirit, without having pre-existed. The Roman authorities should not close off discussion: the question requires further study. There is much of interest in the lecture, on such questions as the historicity in detail of the Infancy narratives. But, while I should not have found it an obstacle to belief in the Incarnation if the Church had taught that St. Joseph was the father of Jesus, it appears to me crystal clear that Mary's virginity when she conceived him is part of the Catholic faith, and that, if we may doubt it, nothing is to be believed on the ground of being part of that faith. That may well now be clear to Fr. Brown, likewise; but the main point of his lecture was to say that it was not then clear. Suppose the Pope appointed a commission, which reported that Catholics need no longer believe the doctrine, and that its report was accepted. Unlike theologians and exegetes, who are prepared to make words mean what they choose, most ordinary people would scruple to recite the words 'born of the Virgin Mary' if they no longer thought Mary to have been a virgin; so either the Creed would have to be dropped from the Mass, or the word 'Virgin' deleted from it. Much of my article was concerned with reunion with the Orthodox, to which Professor Lash does not allude. They have not forgiven us for adding a word to the Creed: if we deleted one from it, all hope of reconciliation would be gone for ever. The Orthodox would still be orthodox: but the Catholic Church would have ceased to be Catholic.

The paramountcy of unity

I worded the principle I named 'the paramountcy of unity' with some care, but, it seems, not enough. The principle, as formulated by me, makes it incumbent on us to avoid taking any step to disrupt unity. Professor Lash misunderstands this as meaning that we must never rock the boat. By writing 'any step to disrupt unity', I did not mean 'any action which might have as a consequence that unity is disrupted': that would say that St. Paul should not have withstood St. Peter, that Pope Clement VII should have granted Henry VIII's divorce, etc. For what I did mean, I will accept his phrase 'breaking the bonds of communion'. One may feel bound, and may in fact *be* bound, to do or say what leads ecclesiastical authority to censure or even cut one off from the body of the Church: what one must not do is separate oneself, individually or as part of a group, from that body. Professor Lash regards my claim that Catholics and Orthodox have acknowledged this principle, and Protestants rejected it, as a piece of 'historical *unreality*'. Readers may recall that I also said that the principle does not decide its own application: in the schism between East and West, each side accepted the principle, but made a different identification of the body from which they were bound not to break away. I see no historical unreality in the remark that Protestants had, from the outset, a different conception of the Catholic Church in which they still proclaimed belief in the Creed.

To say that there are good reasons now to belong to the Catholic Church is not to say that there have always been good reasons for belonging to it; but, if there is a rationale, it is permanently valid. If there is no such rationale, then at many times there have been compelling reasons to separate oneself from a body whose most official actions have been a hideous betrayal of Christ. The institutional Church was responsible for the torture and burning alive of thousands of men and women, and for promoting the witchcraft hysteria which inflicted such horrors on innumerable ignorant old women; the Council of Constance burned Huss, in violation of his safe conduct, and solemnly consigned his soul to the devil; Pope Urban II promoted the First Crusade, which culminated in the wholesale massacre of the inhabitants of Jerusalem; Pope Innocent III promoted the Fourth, which sacked and violated Constantinople and overthrew the Empire: and the malign consequences of these evil acts are not yet dissipated. To remain a member of such a body would itself have been a betrayal of Christ, unless an overriding duty to remain made it possible to do so without complicity in evil. If there were no such duty laid on us, schism would not be a sin; but there could be no such duty unless we could be confident that faithfulness to it would never involve unfaithfulness to Christ. This confidence has historically rested on an assurance that what is definitively taught by the Church, acceptance of which has by and large been acknowledged as the

only condition for membership, can be trusted as truth. No doubt mere opinions have sometimes been represented as part of the Church's teaching: but it has never been proposed that Catholics, as Catholics, have a duty to ascribe either wisdom or probity to their superiors, but only to abide by what the Church teaches. I did not mean to suggest that doctrinal pronouncements always contain the whole truth: only that to assert their falsity is not an option for us. Professor Lash reproaches me for being divisive: but I say that it is those who regard themselves as having a licence to make wholesale denials of what are incontestably part of the Church's constant teaching who are divisive.

Professor Lash will doubtless reply that my divisiveness lies, not in my expressing disagreement with the views advocated by Sheehan, but in my asserting that they ought not to be tolerated, and so, as he says, 'invoking ... the forces of integralist repression'. He fails to see that it is precisely in provoking such a response as mine that the divisiveness of the Sheehan school resides. Never before in my life have I been so much as tempted to think that opinions of other Catholics with which I disagreed, however strongly, ought not to be tolerated. Yet of this I have to say it, because, if these views are to be regarded as consistent with the Church's teaching, 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. If that is so, then there is no belief, as opposed to verbal formula, in which one may repose confidence on the ground that it is what the Church has proclaimed or that it is what Catholic Christians have steadfastly believed. As I said, the principle of the paramountcy of unity does not determine its own application: it does not tell you from which Christian body we have the duty not to break away. I still believe, as, I suppose, until quite recently all Catholics believed, that it can only be a body the substance of whose teachings it is possible to trust as being from God. If the Sheehan consensus is so much as tolerable, the Roman communion is not such a body. That is why the consensus is divisive: it does not merely diverge from, but calls in question, the faith of those who have a more robust conception of what loyalty entails. I do not want to revive the Inquisition, or even the anti-Modernist oath: I only want an authoritative pronouncement on the limits of admissible reinterpretation of the articles of the Creed.

Articles on some of the questions raised in the exchange between Michael Dummett and Nicholas Lash will be appearing in New Blackfriars in 1988.
Editor.