

Responses

The Psychologisation of the Church (contd.): see July/August pp. 258—9, October pp. 449—451.

I am neither a psychiatrist nor a psychologist. So perhaps I should not comment on Dr Jack Dominian's recent contribution to *New Blackfriars* (October 1989). Yet I recklessly wade in and offer the following.

1. It is absurd to say that 'in order to have' faith in 'the Christian faith' 'dependence on psychology is essential'. To have Christian faith you need to believe in the creeds. That means that you need to assent to what they say. If you do that, then you have Christian faith. You believe what Christians believe. You might come to do this in dependence on psychology. You might not. It does not matter. If it did, there were no Christians with faith before the rise of psychology (if here we are talking about psychology as a product of the late nineteenth century and afterwards).

2. It is absurd to say that 'in order to let [the Eucharist] accomplish its Sacramental effect, we need to identify with the person of Jesus Christ and internalise his life'. It will suffice if we receive the Eucharist believing it to be the body and blood of Christ. Quibbles here about intercommunion and the like do not affect the substantial point expressible in such terms as: 'Mrs Mopp, who can only say that she believes what the Church says, can receive all for which the Eucharist was established'. If, by the words I quote from him, Dr Dominian means no more than what I have just suggested, O.K. But if 'identify' and 'internalise' mean more than what I hold to 'suffice', then not-O.K. (If they do mean more, then what, as a matter of interest, might they mean?)

I can make sense of, and agree with, everything else Dr Dominian writes. In principle, I do not dispute for a moment that psychology can help us understand ourselves. Nor do I deny (in fact, I think it highly likely) that—again in principle—it can help us to be better than we are (better Christians than we are, if you like). And I am happy to agree that psychology 'must become to theology what philosophy has been in the past'. According to Aquinas, philosophy is (a) something that can help us express what we believe as Christians and (b) something which can help us refute attacks on Christianity. I see no reason in principle why psychology cannot perform a similar role. But caution is needed in pressing that thesis. And I wish Dr Dominian had been more cautious. In trying to serve the cause of Christianity, he might so easily deny what, as a Christian, he needs to affirm. He might so easily deny what, in his many writings, he has so eloquently affirmed.

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Jack Dominian's 'Response' to Michael Doyle's strictures on the 'Psychologisation of the Church' does not engage with any of Doyle's points, apart from a suggestion that the issues require us to read Dominian's books. A missed opportunity and a pity. However, I should like to comment on Dominian's remarks on three Sacraments: the Eucharist, the 'neglected' sacrament of marriage, and 'Reconciliation'.

Dominian claims that 'in order to let the Eucharist accomplish its sacramental effect, we need to identify with the person of Christ, and internalise His life.' Surely for 'its sacramental effect', one should read 'one of its psychological effects'? Otherwise Dominian would identify 'sacramental' with 'psychological'—an *ignoratio elenchi* if ever there was one. For Dominian would seem to imply that if we do not ('psychologically') so identify with the person of Jesus, the Sacrament is void. This is at least an unCatholic view of the Sacrament, in that the Eucharist would then be loaded with extrinsic requirements for its validity. That view used to be called Jansenism.

The 'components' of marriage, according to Dominian, are falling in love, loving, and sexual love. This seems to me a debased romantic view. In many, perhaps most societies, marriage is a contract, whose psychological accoutrements are, except in extreme cases, irrelevant. Marriage is more often regarded as the establishment of a relationship between *families*, not individuals, and the kind of 'love' Dominian refers to is an optional, if at times welcome, extra. Marriage, in other words, is a contract, not a psychological experience; and the validity of the marriage depends on circumstances where the psychology of the participants is neither here nor there.

The matter of 'Reconciliation' raises wider issues. Dominian claims that this Sacrament requires 'guilt and metanoia', which he interprets as a psychological event. But he avoids Doyle's point that such psychologisation appears to do away with the concept of sin—for which Dominian substitutes the phrase 'our wounds'. The trouble with wounds is that they are normally received by accident, whereas sin cannot be committed by accident. Whatever the relationship between psychology and sin, the distinction is blurred only at grave peril to the Church and to society. For one result of such confusion goes beyond the psychologisation of the Church—it involves a corruption of the word 'guilt', and substitutes for it *feelings* of guilt, even where no sin has been committed, so that even the innocent become guilty.

An example of this can be seen in the aftermath of the 1987 Kings Cross fire disaster. Survivors have been monitored as to their emotional reactions. A psychologist on the radio claimed that many survivors were suffering from 'guilt feelings' even a year after the tragedy. These survivors are said to include not only people who were in the Underground station that evening, but some who were in a train which did not stop at Kings Cross during the evacuation of the station.

Now, whatever feelings of discomfort these people are suffering, they cannot by definition be guilt feelings. For there was nothing that they had done wrong, and nothing that they could have done to assist at the time. They were factually guilty of absolutely nothing. So there are now two questions: why should they have any uneasy feelings at all? And

why should these feelings be labelled as 'guilt' feelings? Would it not be an equally appropriate reaction to say, 'There, but for the grace of God, go I' and to thank Him for sparing one such a death, and one's family such a bereavement? But such a reaction, in that modern irrationalism (i.e. superstition) that is the stuff of psychology, would be labelled 'uncaring' or 'smug' and is *of itself* something to feel guilty about. A totally innocent feeling is labelled as a guilt feeling because of some analogy in its aetiology or type to the feeling one might have after having done some wrong deed. In the process, the link between the feeling and the event is severed, and rational and irrational guilt become confused.

A telling treatment of this phenomenon comes in Kurt Vonnegut's recent novel *Bluebeard* (Jonathan Cape 1988), in which the author talks about 'The Survivor Syndrome', according to which one can only survive if one is evil. All the good people have long ago found an early grave. One character asks, 'Do you believe that you must be wicked, since all the good people are dead, and that the only way to clear your name is to be dead too?' This is a perfect example of modern Manichaeism to which one hopes the Churches will turn their attention: but it has this further diabolic twist in the tail of its false spirituality, which is that if one does not feel guilty in such 'survivor' circumstances, one is made to feel guilty about that! There *must* be something wrong with someone who does not feel guilt, and he is accordingly driven to the attention of the psychologist. A sacramental rite, the Eucharist (or thanksgiving), would, I suggest, be far more rational.

But this Manichaean view of those feelings we label as guilt is attached to a further nexus of words and understandings which constitute, unless one is very careful, a whole modern social and psychological morality. The mentality I am trying to describe reveals itself in a remark made recently on the radio by an active worker for the Samaritans. The subject under discussion was teenage suicide, which is apparently increasing everywhere, especially in Japan and some African countries. The Samaritan saw it as the role of his organisation to 'make them feel as if they were cared for.' Not to care for them; not to make them see that they are cared for; not even to make them feel that they are cared for. To make them *feel as if* they are cared for. But what if they are not cared for? Is it to be taken as always, or even normally the case, that people try to kill themselves in a mistaken perception of their situation? Is it not relevant to their circumstances whether they are or are not cared for by somebody? Again we have a moral distinction to make about the truth of the feelings concerned.

Michael Doyle has touched on a crucial problem in the Church's approach to the ethics of modern secularism. It is a pity that Jack Dominian does not deign to recognise it.

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**Animals — the need for a new Catholicism:
David S. Oderberg's May article (pp. 245—8)**

David S. Oderberg seems a little naive in his view of the impact of papal documents on Catholics. Even I, who am pro-*Humanae Vitae*, doubt if an encyclical called *Animalis Vitae*, condemning vivisection, would be so influential. And were such a document anything more than a condemnation, it would surely come under fire from the keener defenders of animal rights for 'speciesism'. And I wonder if Mr Oderberg has fully thought out what he means by 'a new Catholicism'.

More serious is his failure, though a professional philosopher, to advance any philosophic position which would avoid the pitfalls he recognises in Singer's approach. He does not face what is surely the main objection to the recognition of animal rights, the fear that doing so would lead to a devaluation of human rights (see, on this point, the very interesting editorial in *Anthropology Today* for October 1988).

Could I very briefly suggest two possible lines of argument which might be used in support of a very moderate animal rights' position?

First, human beings are themselves animals, albeit endowed with conscience, reason and language. Violations of the rights of animals degrade in some degree this common heritage of life. This is not quite the same as saying that crimes against animals train us for crimes against humans.

Second, in the very long course of human history a symbiosis has developed between animals and human kind which can perhaps be called by the Biblical term of covenant. Human beings cannot live on the world as if animals did not exist, nor can they hand over the world to animals. But their relationship cannot be simply an 'I-it' relationship. There is surely some recognition of this in the rite, reported, I believe, from various parts of the world, by which a hunter begs pardon of the animal he kills.

The first argument is a 'nature' argument, the second is a 'history' argument, yet both suggest that animals do have rights, but by reason of their relationship with humans. Animal rights are involved with, and to a great degree dependent on, human rights, which is not to say that an animal has only rights which a particular human may choose to give it.

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