

Reviews

THE WAY TO NICEA: THE DIALECTICAL DEVELOPMENT OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY, by Bernard Lonergan. Translated by Conn O'Donovan. *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London, 1976. 143 pp. £5.50.

From some points of view, the most puzzling of the eight 'functional specialities' between which, in *Method in Theology*, Lonergan distributes theological tasks is that entitled 'dialectics'. The source of the puzzlement does not lie in the recommendation that there be a distinct 'speciality' the concerns of which are focussed on 'the character, the oppositions, and the relations of the many viewpoints exhibited in conflicting Christian movements, their conflicting histories, and their conflicting interpretations' (*Method*, p 129). This programme is not puzzling because Lonergan admits, quite openly, that 'dialectic' is 'a generalised apologetic conducted in an ecumenical spirit' (*Method*, p 130), and, for all the bad press that it has recently received as a result of a reaction against centuries of rationalistic misuse, there is nothing dishonourable, or manifestly improper, in the notion of an apologetic on behalf of a movement for whose central beliefs truth-claims are made. Lonergan's concept of 'dialectics' is puzzling because, when he says that 'The function of dialectics will be to bring [fundamental] conflicts to light, and to provide a technique that objectifies subjective differences and promotes conversion' (*Method*, p 235), it is not clear whether it is primarily 'intellectual' or 'religious' conversion that he has in mind. For a rationalist or a positivist, of course, they converge to the point of identity, but Lonergan is not a rationalist, although there is more than a hint of positivism in his treatment of revelation. Moreover, a suspicion begins to dawn: is not a method of tackling historical conflicts whose function is to 'promote conversion', whether 'religious' or 'intellectual', likely to deal somewhat insensitively with the obdurate complexity of historical experience and interpretation?

The puzzle might be resolved, and the suspicion confirmed or shown to be unfounded, if Lonergan himself were to let us see him at work as dialectician. And

this is what the publication of *The Way to Nicea* has done for a wider public than would be likely to read a twelve-year-old theological textbook on the Trinity, constructed 'under impossible conditions' (p xxv), a textbook of which the present work amounts to one-sixth (the rest being left, for the time being, in the obscurity of the Latin tongue).

In the introduction written for this English edition (perhaps the most important two pages in the book) Lonergan warns us that he does 'not propose to add to erudition by research, or to clarify interpretation by study, or to enrich history with fresh information' (p viii). Rather, he proposes to employ his dialectical skills to 'set certain key issues in high relief to concentrate their oppositions and their interplay' (p viii).

His concern, in so doing, is to set in relief the phenomenon of the 'emergence and the development of dogma', as the underlying issue that 'without any explicit advertence on anyone's part' (p viii) underlay the explicit debate on christological issues. In the body of the work, after an introductory chapter on dogmatic development (which contains few surprises for anyone familiar with his more recent work) he pursues this objective with clarity and vigour. But my puzzlement and suspicion remain.

I share Lonergan's conviction that the 'way to Nicea' is to be positively and not (as with Harnack) negatively assessed, at least in the sense that, had Christianity failed to meet the challenge that, at that period, it sought to meet, it would have failed adequately to come to grips with some aspects of the issue of the *truthfulness* of its confession.

And yet, and yet. However permissible it may be to 'set certain key issues in high relief', in order to make explicit this underlying conflict, can the 'way to Nicea' plausibly be presented as, without qualification, a victory of the forces of

light over the ranks of darkness? If there is much that has to be set on the profit side of the account, was not there a price to be paid for the development? (It would be instructive to compare in detail Lonergan's triumphalistic account with, for example, the historically more nuanced attempt to set certain key issues in high relief that one finds in Pannenberg's essay on 'The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology'). Perhaps the following passage may serve to illustrate why it is that my puzzlement remains and my suspicion is *uncomfortably confirmed*: 'The *term* of the dialectic is either heresy or an advance in theology. It is heresy, where only the light of natural reason is operative; it is an advance in theology, where reason is illumined and strengthened by faith... inasmuch as it is an advance in theology, we shall find it in Athanasius; inasmuch as it is heresy, we shall find it in the Arians' (p 59). If dialectics' enables one roundly to assert that in no sense, and to no extent, was the mind of Arius 'illumined and strengthened by faith', and that Athanasius's position was *simply* an 'advance in theology', then it is indeed a remarkable technique. But if

this, *like* this, is the fruit of that conversion which dialectics seeks to promote, then my advice to theologians would be: *pecca fortiter*.

The translation has been done with admirable care and clarity by Conn O'Donovan, who also contributes a helpful introduction, situating the work in the overall context of Lonergan's *oeuvre*. But that context is too restricted. Lonergan is, after all, not the only person to have tackled these issues, or this period, in recent decades. And yet O'Donovan makes no attempt to situate this idiosyncratic fragment in the context of recent debates on theological method in general, or on ante-Nicene history in particular. Some months ago, in *New Blackfriars*, Fergus Kerr drew attention to the danger inherent in Lonergan's tendency to work in isolation. In the measure that, as in the present case, his commentators and presenters reinforce this tendency, they maximise the risk that Lonergan's work will soon be ignored by a wider academic public irritated by the arrogance of monologue. And that would be a pity.

NICHOLAS LASH

LOOK FOR THE LIVING: THE CORPORATE NATURE OF RESURRECTION by Peter Selby, *SCM Press, London, 1976*, viii + 212 pp., £2.50 paper.

Peter Selby's book on the resurrection is unlike any other in that it does not concentrate on demonstrating the veracity of belief in the resurrection – or in showing that it cannot be demonstrated – but attempts to unify various strands of meaning in the traditional belief. The book is not a joy to read but it does make a number of important points. Dr Selby wants to clarify what it is that we believe in when we believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and he identifies a number of themes in the New Testament: the new justice of a recreated world, the mission of the Church, the exaltation and authority of Jesus Christ as Lord, the new life of believers and the new future of our age. All these ideas must be held together to do justice to the fullness of meaning in belief in the resurrection, for it is certainly true that most writers on the subject emphasize one or maybe two dimensions of meaning at the expense of other aspects of belief.

Moreover, Dr Selby denies that the private experience of an individual can alone justify belief in the resurrection as this is only possible through the corporate experience of the Church, the new Israel. The New Testament has scattered meanings of the resurrection in all directions, no single interpretation of the resurrection can do justice to it and only the Church as a whole can pull together the disparate and pluriform experience of its members. The Christian Church in its turn can only speak with authority and credibility about its belief in the resurrection as a belief in a new life, a new future and a new justice if it engages in contemporary struggles for justice and truth.

While Dr Selby takes a traditional view of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, he asserts that an historical analysis of the New Testament evidence can only leave open the question of the factuality of