

Response

The Dummett-Lash Debate: positively the last appearance

Professor Michael Dummett and Professor Nicholas Lash are both still very angry with each other. After the debate had been closed by the Editor, Professor Lash returned to the attack in the February issue, in his article 'The Difficulty of Making Sense' (p. 82). He wrote that Professor Dummett accuses most of the contributors to the debate of proposing that 'each of us should re-invent' Christian religion, and that he 'does not seem much to care whether the grave accusations he makes are true or false.' Professor Dummett has protested to the Editor, 'As Professor Lash knows very well, such a charge is the most damaging that can be made to the professional integrity of an academic. It is, in my case, wholly unwarranted, and Professor Lash owes me an apology, in your columns, for his intemperate manner of conducting controversy'. It is deeply distressing that two men of such evident intelligence and integrity should find themselves locked in mutual recrimination. But this is not just a squabble between academics.

Of the truths of our faith two things must be said, that they are established and secure and can be proclaimed with confidence, and also that they are a deep mystery to which we can draw near only with diffidence and humility, and in our attempts to articulate them we still fumble for words and make many mistakes. The truths of the Faith are gift and promise.

The fundamental truths of our faith, such as, for example, the Incarnation, the Resurrection of Christ, and His true humanity and divinity, are not open to question by someone who would call himself a Roman Catholic. The Spirit is poured upon the Church so that She may, in certain circumstances, discriminate between truth and falsehood, and she has done so and spoken with authority. Michael Dummett is rightly indignant at any betrayal of the truths so secured.

But Nicholas Lash is also surely right to insist that making sense of these truths, drawing close to the mystery of our redemption, is a painful and tentative business. We can only speak of the mystery of God by stretching our words beyond their ordinary meaning, and through the unending labour of incarnating the Word of God in contemporary words. And in doing this we will often be muddled, off-beam, go astray. But we can risk going wrong sometimes, because the Spirit of God is poured upon his people to keep them in truth. A Church which is filled

with fear of heresy accusations will be one in which the preaching of the gospel will wither.

Professors Dummett and Lash are both very angry, and they are angry because they both care deeply about the truth of our faith. But they differ, I suspect, in how they see the relationship between the truth as secured, in the Creeds and Councils, and the truth as that which is always to be sought in an unending theological labour. The statement that 'Christ is risen from the dead', for example, must have some content, it cannot be open to any possible interpretation, otherwise it might just as well not have been made. Yet we must also claim that we can never have completed our search for the mystery of Christ's Resurrection. We will always be struggling to understand the meaning of Easter. This is surely the issue, hardly debated, and yet that does not explain why they are quite so angry with each other.

Maybe it is because they both fear that the truth that they cherish, as that which is given and to be sought, is under siege. And they are right. For theology is threatened by heresy and by the hunters of heresy; both by uncertainty and by a brash certainty that stifles theological exploration. But we must not succumb to panic.

There is nothing so destructive of the search for truth as fear, for it is fear that makes us see demons and witches everywhere, whether in San Francisco or the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. One lesson that we have learnt from the seventeenth century is that it is the witch hunters who give power to the witches. We must above all trust each other, forbear with each other, bend over backwards to assume the good intentions of each other, otherwise we are not trusting the Spirit who is the source of all truth, both as that which is given and that which is promised. In an atmosphere of fear even good men become angry with each other and we all lose.

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