

- Palestine question*, Beirut 1969, pp. 35–8.
- 6 *The Life of Jesus* by D.F. Strauss, London 1848, 6th ed. 1913, pp. 73–5.
  - 7 *Ibid.* p. 85.
  - 8 J.W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as told in her letters and journals* 2nd ed. London and Edinburgh 1886, p. 395, G.S. Haight; *George Eliot, a biography*, Oxford 1968, p. 39.
  - 9 *Daniel Deronda*, p. 231.
  - 10 *Ibid.* p. 632.
  - 11 *Ibid.* pp. 881–2.
  - 12 *Ibid.* p. 266.
  - 13 R.H. Hutton in *The Spectator*, 10 June 1876. On 29 July he was more positive.
  - 14 See R.F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch*, Harmondsworth 1993, p. 226 and ref.
  - 15 G.S. Haight, *op. cit.*, pp. 463–5 and 507.
  - 16 *Daniel Deronda*, p. 416, remembered on p. 424.
  - 17 *The Jewish Chronicle*, London, 15 Dec. 1876. See also R. Levitt, *George Eliot and the Jewish Connection*, Jerusalem 1975 and S. Werses in *Daniel Deronda, a centenary symposium*, ed. Alice Shalvi, Jerusalem, 1976.
  - 18 *Daniel Deronda*, p. 881.
  - 19 *Ibid.* p. 724.
  - 20 A.L. Tibawi, *Russian cultural penetration of Syria-Palestine in the nineteenth century*, reprinted from *The Royal Central Asia Journal* 52, 1966, p. 3.
  - 21 *Daniel Deronda*, p. 584.
  - 22 *Ibid.* p. 413

## On New Testament Scholarship and the Integrity of Faith

Hugo Meynell

*Hermes and Athena*<sup>1</sup> consists of the proceedings of a conference of philosophers and New Testament scholars. I think the sponsors of the conference are to be congratulated on bringing members of the two groups together; the interaction was salutary, for all that one of the most significant exchanges is very angry, and makes painful reading. The issues raised appear to me to be of quite fundamental importance.

### I

As Michael Dummett sees it, the most influential New Testament scholars of the present day operate with two axioms, that the Gospels are not a reliable witness to Jesus' words and deeds, and that Jesus had no powers and no source of knowledge that were not available to other human beings.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, they not only offend and bewilder ordinary believers, but effectively deprive Christianity of any rational basis.<sup>3</sup>

However, there is good reason to disbelieve what these scholars seem to take for granted, that the central doctrines of Christianity were derived not from what was taught by Jesus himself, but from later reflection on his life.<sup>4</sup> For this to have been the case, the disciples must have been either deliberate deceivers or mentally unhinged, and their subsequent behaviour is not consistent with either hypothesis.<sup>5</sup> Another mistake that these scholars make is to assume that one should prescind from faith in trying to determine what is or is not likely to be historically true in the Gospel narratives; in general, probability cannot be assigned to alleged events without reference to background beliefs.<sup>6</sup> It should be made clear once and for all that the historical views of the critics referred to are incompatible with the Catholic faith; otherwise, that faith can only be exposed to contempt. It might be protested that such an act would lead to division in the Church; but if avoidance of division is the most important of all doctrinal concerns, more important than the integrity and self-consistency of the faith, then many of the councils of the Church, for example Chalcedon, have erred grievously.<sup>7</sup>

John Collins dismisses Dummett's claim to speak for ordinary believers, who, as he says, do not claim to be authorities on the philosophy of religion. He complains that Dummett shows no sign of any but the most superficial acquaintance with the work of biblical critics, and says that it is most improbable that any of them are committed to the alleged axioms. In biblical criticism, no conclusion can be advanced except on the basis of objective scrutiny of the relevant evidence.<sup>8</sup> Dummett shows himself quite insensitive to the various literary forms employed by the New Testament authors, and seems to hold a view of faith as merely propositional.<sup>9</sup> To base Christ's divinity on his own supposed beliefs about himself is a strange procedure indeed; at that rate we would have to take Caligula's claims to be divine with equal seriousness.<sup>10</sup> Dummett's whole argument is circular; in effect, he appeals to the historicity of the Gospels as evidence for the truth of the dogmas of the Church, and the truth of the dogmas of the Church as evidence for the historicity of the Gospels.<sup>11</sup> In spite of his appeals to reason, Dummett is a fideist at heart, as is shown by his remark that Christians would never have arrived at their characteristic beliefs by ordinary processes of inference.<sup>12</sup> His dogmatism is clearly divisive in tendency, and utterly at odds with his claim to be concerned with Christian reconciliation.<sup>13</sup>

In his reply to Collins, Dummett says: 'If New Testament exegetes can demonstrate that Christ made no such claim (sc. to divinity), or that he could not have known it to be true, they will have achieved what many have craved, a definitive refutation of Christianity; if they purport

merely to be “nuancing” the religion, they bring not only it but themselves into ridicule.”<sup>14</sup>

Wayne Meeks believes the Epistle to the Colossians to have been written by a disciple of Paul shortly after the latter’s death. In his view, the main object of the epistle, which has often been misunderstood by scholars, is to make a strong connection between knowledge and morality. Accordingly the mythic figure of Christ, and the idealised historical figure of Paul, are presented by the author as parts of a picture which give intelligibility and value to a certain pattern of behaviour.<sup>15</sup> In reply, Eleonore Stump argues that, if the author was not in fact Paul, her or his pretence to be Paul completely destroys the moral authority essential to the purpose of the letter as interpreted by Meeks, whether deception was intended or not, and whether the recipients were actually deceived or not.<sup>16</sup>

The historicity of the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb is defended by Stephen T. Davis, on the grounds that they are widely supported in the New Testament as a whole, and that the proclamation of the resurrection would have been unintelligible without it.<sup>17</sup> Cornelius Plantinga is in general agreement with Davis, but says that he ought not to assume that lateness necessarily implies historical unreliability in the case of early Christian traditions. He criticizes the theological assumptions of those who assert the truth of the doctrine of the resurrection, but deny that the tradition of the empty tomb is historical.<sup>18</sup> To the contrary, Adela Collins argues that the story of the empty tomb formed no part of the primitive preaching, and that it was an invention of the author of Mark.<sup>19</sup> Her argument is anatomized into ten steps by Norman Kretzmann. While he agrees that her conclusions follow from her premises, he questions some of these; for example, that Paul’s understanding of the resurrection as we find it in I Corinthians, and the summaries of early Christian preaching in Acts, do not imply that the tomb was empty; and that Mark’s story of the empty tomb does not depend on a prior source.<sup>20</sup> Collins replies that the passages in the early parts of Acts which presuppose the empty tomb derive not from the early preaching, but from its elaboration by the author; and that there is reason to suppose that Paul considered the spiritual body of the risen Jesus to be discontinuous with his earthly and physical body.<sup>21</sup>

That ordinary believers, and even theologians, need take no account of what he calls ‘critical studies’ of the New Testament, is argued by Peter van Inwagen.<sup>22</sup> He points out that there is an enormous diversity of opinion among New Testament scholars about practically every aspect of their specialty. There are grounds for believing what the Church claims and presupposes, however difficult it is to spell out these

grounds, and however far they fall short of conclusive proof. The truth of Christian faith, as he sees it, is compatible with a good deal of minor historical inaccuracy in the Gospel narratives—for example, if the context of a saying or a miracle of Jesus has been changed,<sup>23</sup> or if a saying which is not in fact his is still representative of the *sort* of thing that he said.<sup>24</sup> And is it not plausible to suppose that Providence may have acted on the ordinary processes of transmission in such a way as to ensure sufficient accuracy for faith?<sup>25</sup> Ronald Feenstra, while sympathetic to van Inwagen's general approach, suggests that theologians at least may find useful the help that critical studies can provide, for example in clarifying the special message of each of the evangelists.<sup>26</sup>

It is maintained by Harold Attridge that there are various distinct christologies in the New Testament; this fact, and others which may be known by the application of critical methods to Scripture, issue in challenges to faith which, while serious, are not insuperable.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, 'it is not immediately clear how to construe the identity between the somewhat visionary wit and activist of Galilee and the exalted Christ of Peter's speeches in Acts or the eternal Word of God in the Fourth Gospel.' Yet it may be urged that the authority implicit in the speech and actions of Jesus, which seem to amount to the claim that he had a unique role in God's plans, constitute an implicit christology.<sup>28</sup> Richard Swinburne admits that the christologies distinguished by Attridge *differ* from one another, but insists that they are not mutually *inconsistent*. He alludes to three mistakes which he thinks are apt to be made by scholars in their approach to biblical texts: first, to assume that one can make properly informed judgments about them without taking account of the questions whether or not there is a God, and whether or not such a God would be likely to intervene in history; second, to fail to distinguish texts in their role as parts of divine revelation, from their function in informing us about what happened in history; third, to believe that each biblical text has one plain meaning, rather than depending for its significance on contexts of various extension in which it is set.<sup>29</sup>

It is argued by Marilyn Adams that the accounts of Peter and Paul in Acts use miracles to vindicate their mission, in a manner which imitates the role of miracles in the records of Jesus' life.<sup>30</sup> She distinguishes sharply between magic and miracle, and argues that Jesus and the apostolic leaders are not represented by Luke as magicians, or indeed as exemplars of the concept of *theios aner* which was prevalent in Hellenistic culture. Thomas Tobin replies that there were various attitudes towards miracles among the early Christians, some of which, though not all, made them approximate to magic; this applies to the

miracles reported in Luke and Acts. He follows this discussion with reflections on how in general we ought to approach reports of miracles.<sup>31</sup>

In the course of a survey of trends in contemporary Catholic biblical scholarship,<sup>32</sup> John Donahue describes how, since the Second Vatican Council, the majority have come increasingly to accept the results of historical scholarship; and how attempts have been made to apply the fruits of their labours to theology. He adds that there has been criticism of the historical method over the last twenty years; and that new approaches to the text, especially of literary and social-scientific inspiration, have been gaining ground. He himself suggests that it is a type of literary criticism, the rhetorical, which offers the best hope of dialogue between theology and biblical studies. Bas van Fraassen admits the fascination of biblical studies, but tends to be sceptical of their claim to amount to a science. He wonders whether it is possible for biblical scholarship to discover something which would be totally destructive of Christianity as we now understand it; and concludes that he does not know.<sup>33</sup>

## II

It appears to me not too difficult to answer, at least in principle, the question raised by van Fraassen. If the most stringent application of the historical method were to converge on the view that Jesus never existed, or was anything like the political trickster argued by Hermann Reimarus or the practising homosexual and conjuror portrayed by Morton Smith,<sup>34</sup> then it would be all up with Christianity in anything approaching the traditional sense of the term. How far less extreme results would subvert the faith, and how far such results have in fact been established beyond reasonable doubt, are moot questions.

Two of the philosophers, Michael Dummett and Peter van Inwagen, seem almost to make a virtue out of ignorance of biblical scholarship, in a way that can hardly fail to be galling to biblical scholars. Ought not every Christian to be interested in the foundation documents of her faith? And does not a serious interest necessarily imply some concern with the latest and best modern scholarship which bears upon it? It would be easy, as a consequence of such considerations, to dismiss the arguments of these philosophers. But I think that this would be a serious mistake.

While I am not myself a specialist in New Testament studies, I have read a certain amount of the literature of the subject, and I am afraid that this has done nothing to allay the anxieties which I have felt, for more than three decades, about the tension between Christian faith in its

traditional form and the actual or possible results of biblical criticism, especially so far as these bear on the documents of the New Testament. For all the profit that I have gained from reading the work of the more radical biblical scholars, I have not found that they so much help me to deal with these misgivings, as invite me to forget about them. Though I do not venture an opinion on how things stand with that frequently invoked personage 'the ordinary' Christian or Catholic,<sup>35</sup> I do know that many students who are introduced to critical studies of the New Testament are troubled in a way very similar to myself. And I once met an ageing academic, who had felt the need to look into the basis of his faith after the death of his beloved wife, and was horrified when he read some standard critical writings on the New Testament. It seems to me that the grounds for these anxieties are brought out with great clarity by the philosophical contributors to this symposium, whether one agrees with the conclusions that they come to or not.

The basic issue appears to me to be this. Traditional Christian belief, whether in its Catholic, Protestant, or Eastern Orthodox form, may well seem to have been based on an assumption which was so obvious that no-one bothered to spell it out: that the New Testament documents, and in particular the four Gospels, are at least roughly accurate from a historical point of view. Until about the late eighteenth century, no methods had been evolved for testing with any degree of objectivity whether they were so or not. The biblical scholarship sponsored by many Protestant denominations from the early nineteenth century onwards has seemed very largely to impugn this accuracy; Catholic authorities reacted to this with an intransigent hostility which only abated in the nineteen-sixties with the Second Vatican Council. Since that time many Catholic scholars seem to have become as sceptical about the historicity of the New Testament as their more radical Protestant or non-Christian colleagues. But the question will not go away: is it not at least very plausible to suppose that the whole edifice of traditional Christian, and *a fortiori* Catholic, doctrine, is based on the assumption that the picture that we have from the Gospels of what the historical Jesus said and did is at least on the whole an accurate one?

As far as I am concerned, the answer to this question seems definitely in the affirmative, short of good reasons to the contrary, which I have never seen advanced by anyone. (Plenty of *bad* reasons have been provided, by Rudolf Bultmann and others; but that is a different matter.<sup>36</sup>) To accept Christian doctrine in its classical form (roughly, as defined by the ecumenical councils up to Chalcedon), and to reject the overall historical accuracy of the Gospels, seems to me as curious as to

accept the truth of some scientific theory, while denying that any of the alleged observations and experimental results on which it was based actually occurred. But to many biblical scholars, the contradictory appears to be equally obvious. Is this striking disagreement due to something that I have overlooked, or to something that *they* have? One may well argue that a fair and objective assessment of the Gospels shows them to be very largely fictions, either consciously fabricated or reported in good faith, either invented in all innocence or deliberately intended to deceive. What seems to me odd, and I think does so to many people whether they are educated or not, or whether they regard themselves as Christians or not, is to suppose that this conclusion is perfectly compatible with Christian faith in something like its traditional form.

I know a person who became a Roman Catholic, for all that he really loved the Anglicanism in which he had been brought up, largely because he felt that the Christian faith as he understood it was quite incompatible with the sceptical results of New Testament study which seemed to be accepted, or even actively advanced and argued for, by Anglican scholars. At the time, Roman Catholic scholars were not permitted publicly to argue for these conclusions. I wonder what he would make of the present situation.

It has often seemed to me that many theology and religious studies departments have a hidden curriculum, of severing in the minds of students the natural inference from the truth of Christianity to the substantial historicity of the Gospel narratives. It is very misleading to regard this as merely a matter of replacing an ignorant and unreflective 'fundamentalism' with an informed and critical attitude. And that there is no such logical connection as I have described is by no means identical with the view, with which it is often confused, that Christian belief ought not to prejudice the results of historical investigation. After all, for all that one knows *a priori*, historical investigation might confirm the overall historical truth of the Gospels; or it might tend overwhelmingly to disconfirm it, in which case, given that the inference holds, the Christian faith would have to be given up. One could conclude that New Testament studies had knocked the bottom out of traditional Christianity; or alternatively one might wonder whether a relatively 'conservative'<sup>7</sup> conclusion to critical investigation was quite such a lost cause after all. In effect, this last seems to be the attitude of most of the philosophers who have contributed to this volume.

Just after *Hermes and Athena* first came into my hands, I was attending Mass, and one of the readings was the eleventh chapter of the gospel of John, the story of how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. I

found myself feeling astonishment at those Christians who appear quite content with the view that it is a fabrication. (For the unbeliever, of course, nothing could be more natural than that; as Hume would say, it is always more credible that someone should have lied or been deceived, than that such a violation of the laws of nature should really have occurred.) Has not the power of this magnificent narrative depended, I thought, for most Christians over the course of the centuries, on the assumption that it is on the whole a true report of what Jesus said and did on a certain occasion?

What 'the average Christian layperson', if indeed she is not a myth, may think on this or other topics, is of course disputed, and may be subject to more or less fruitless or tendentious speculation. But I do not think the following imaginary dialogue, between an inquisitive sociologist (say) and an ordinary Christian believer, would be unduly atypical or unrepresentative. 'Do you believe that this story, about Lazarus being raised from the dead by Jesus, is an account of something that actually happened?' 'Of course.' 'Why?' 'Because I'm a Christian.' 'What has that got to do with it?' 'Well, as a Christian, I cannot believe that one of the evangelists would lie or be deceived, at least on such an important matter as this. And if one thought that they would, what on earth would be the point of being a Christian at all?' It is of course notorious that there are many Christians, and not only uneducated ones, who are shocked when they hear of bishops who deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus. (Ordinary people, I think, are apt to be rather like some of the philosophers represented in this volume, in wondering what other kind of 'resurrection' there could be.)

Someone might say, 'Very well then, so Christianity has to be modified in such a way as to be consistent with the conclusions of a rather radical biblical criticism. Why should it not be so modified?' The real question is whether the result would amount to anything which is really worth having, except for those who are (in E. L. Mascall's memorable phrase) 'pathologically sophisticated'. Some people might be disposed to use the myth-like symbols associated with the traditional faith, as psychological helps to a way of life deemed to be more desirable than the ordinary run of human behaviour, in the way that seems to be suggested in the article by Wayne Meeks. But why should most people *bother* to do so? Apart from a feeling of nostalgia for traditional ways of speaking and behaving, what is the point of seeing one's life in terms of Christian symbolism and acting accordingly, when the alleged facts which the symbolism originally presupposed, and has presupposed for the vast majority of Christians always and everywhere, are acknowledged very largely to be fictions? One can feel pleasantly



disposed towards traditional rites and usages, and even feel that they are of profound psychological value and moral usefulness, without being a Christian in anything near the traditional sense.

A New Testament scholar of relatively 'conservative' tendency once remarked, that persons who told as many lies as the four evangelists did on Dr. Bultmann's account, ought not to be taken seriously on any matter whatsoever. Adela Collins argues that the author of Mark invented the story of the empty tomb; Wayne Meeks (in effect) that the author of the epistle to the Colossians was fraudulently trying to pass himself or herself off as the apostle Paul. Both cases are argued with much learning and skill. But I think that the training of modern New Testament scholars seems oddly to have insulated them against considerations like the following, which seem of concern to the philosophical contributors to this collection. If one believes these things, a lurid light seems to be cast not only on the moral probity of these authors themselves, but on the gullibility of the early Christian community. One may find it surprising for people to defend such behaviour, as Collins and Meeks both do. Is this due to a residual feeling that, after all, Christian faith will be fatally compromised if 'Mark' and 'Pauline' are stigmatized as outright liars whose impostures have deceived millions of people on matters of the greatest importance? If one finds them not to blame—if, for example, they did not intend to be taken literally, and their immediate hearers did not take them literally—is not their authority as witnesses to the faith fatally compromised at least so far as we and our contemporaries are concerned? But Dummett pertinently asks whether there is any evidence that their hearers or readers at any stage did not take them literally.<sup>38</sup>

It may be protested, on the lines of John Collins's aspersions against Dummett, that the concerns which I have expressed are merely a consequence of an unduly 'propositional' conception of Christianity, or that preoccupation with the 'propositional' is a peculiarity of intellectuals, and of reactionary ones at that. One might also be disposed to see the issue as between Christian 'tolerance' on the one hand and un-Christian exclusivity and aggressivity on the other. But surely it would be agreed on all hands that not just any old factual or moral belief (or 'proposition') is compatible with Christianity, so long as 'Christianity' amounts to anything at all. People of radical persuasion, in my experience, are more sensitive to what appear to be the moral than to the apparent factual implications of Christianity; so I will take this into account in the following examples. Suppose there were an influential group of persons who claimed to be Christian, but maintained that their faith was entirely compatible with the practice or the approval of

genocide or sexual abuse of children; would it not be reasonable to denounce such people as making nonsense of Christianity? Would one take quite seriously their protestations that those who so denounced them were failing in the virtues of Christian charity and toleration? Dummett, van Inwagen and Swinburne evidently believe that there are some possible propositions about the historical Jesus which are equally incompatible with Christianity in its traditional sense; and I must say that, whether one agrees with it or not, a least this is a suggestion that merits serious consideration. The historical Jesus sketched in Attridge's article is an attractive figure, who still has a lot to teach most of us about authentic human living;<sup>39</sup> but I do not think (Attridge himself seems to express doubts about the matter<sup>40</sup>) that this Jesus will bear the weight of interpretation which the New Testament, followed by the whole doctrinal tradition of Christianity, has imposed upon him.

By reproaching Dummett for maintaining a 'propositional' view of Christianity, John Collins in effect concedes Dummett's point, that many radical critics assume Christian faith to be a matter of a subjective attitude which one takes up to Jesus;<sup>41</sup> what more is left, after all, when the 'propositional' element is removed? I think that it is certain, as a matter of historical and sociological fact, that the faith of the vast majority of Christians has been propositional; not in the sense, of course, which implies that most Christians would have said, 'Our belief consists of propositions', or that their faith was *merely* a matter of *bare* assent to propositions. The average layperson would no more say, 'I assent to propositions', than the ordinary person would say, when about to take a bath, 'I am about to submerge myself in H<sub>2</sub>O'; yet all the same, in both cases, the one thing implies the other. Surely nearly all Christians would take it for granted that their faith commits them to belief that certain states of affairs were the case—for example, that God exists, and that Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead—and that the various subjective attitudes of which faith consists, in addition to these factual beliefs, were in fact justified, and could only be justified, by reference to them. In my view, for what it is worth, it is non-propositional rather than propositional faith which is the special preserve of intellectuals, and of muddled ones at that. That faith has other elements than *mere* assent to propositions is, of course, obvious, but irrelevant to the matter in hand.

Collins says that he doubts whether there is any New Testament scholar who accepts 'axioms' of the kind alluded to by Dummett.<sup>42</sup> Certainly, if Dummett means that a significant number of New Testament scholars consciously work with these premises in mind, he is wrong. But I see no reason to attribute to him so obviously foolish an

opinion. What I take him to be getting at is that these assumptions work as unacknowledged principles dictating what in the gospels the critics are inclined to accept as authentic reports. It is far from obvious to me that many New Testament scholars do not work according to 'axioms' in this sense, or that Dummett has failed to identify two of the most crucial of them. (If the axioms were made conscious, it would then be a simple matter to ask what good reason there was for holding them.)

It is true, as Collins insists,<sup>43</sup> that many efforts are made by biblical scholars to convey the results of their work to ordinary people. But I do not see how this affects the 'conservative' (or anti-Christian) case. The point is, I think, that many ordinary believers would lose their faith if they were convinced by the arguments of the critics, since the putative logical connection to which I have drawn attention, between the truth of the faith and the overall historicity of the Gospels, has not been broken in their minds. I know that I would lose my faith if convinced by the historical conclusions of the more radical scholars.

If a person values the Christian faith, but cannot reconcile it with the conclusions of some scholars, she may wonder whether the conclusions are quite so well-grounded as is sometimes made out. One may consistently maintain both that the integrity of the faith ought to be preserved, and that the Scriptures have to be objectively investigated; this will be possible, on the view that I am putting forward, if it should happen that such investigation issues in relatively 'conservative' conclusions. And these continue to be maintained by good scholars. It often seems to be taken for granted by critics that the Fourth Gospel is virtually worthless as a source for the historical Jesus;<sup>44</sup> but one wonders how many who adopt this position have taken into account the arguments of C. H. Dodd, Ethelbert Stauffer, Leon Morris, or John Robinson.<sup>45</sup> Dodd makes the interesting suggestion that the well-known failure of the nineteenth-century 'quest for the historical Jesus' was due to the fact that concentration by historians on the Synoptic account, in neglect of the Johannine, led to 'an impoverished, one-sided, and finally incredible view of the facts.'<sup>46</sup> Raymond Brown has wittily remarked, that authors who maintain as a matter of course that John is not to be trusted as a historical source 'represent an uncritical traditionalism which arises with age, even in heterodoxy.'<sup>47</sup>

Collins tells us that, in biblical studies, no argument or conclusion is invulnerable to evidence or to further argument.<sup>48</sup> Certainly, this is the ideal of any scientific or scholarly discipline; whether the ideal is always adhered to in practice, here or elsewhere, is another matter. For example, the hypothesis that Mark was the first of the gospels to be written, and that it was used by the authors of Matthew and Luke in

writing their own gospels, has been called the one assured result of modern critical study of the gospels. (It seems to be taken for granted by Adela Collins in her fine article on the problem of the empty tomb in the present volume, and is crucial to her argument.) Yet the hypothesis has been subjected to extremely damaging criticism by a number of authors, including B. C. Butler, Pierson Parker, W. R. Farmer, John Rist, and John Wenham.<sup>49</sup> But I do not find that those who affirm or assume the priority of Mark usually advert to these authors' arguments, let alone set themselves to refute them. Where the dating of the New Testament documents in general is concerned, John Robinson has remarked that scholars have a habit of tinkering with bits of the conventionally accepted chronological framework, rather than raising the more fundamental question of how far that framework is itself securely grounded.<sup>50</sup>

The important point, that one's background beliefs affect and ought to affect one's assessment of the gospels as historical records, is made by several of the philosophical contributors.<sup>51</sup> An analogy may bring out why this is so. If I hear an account of poltergeist phenomena, and I am quite unfamiliar with such matters, I may quite reasonably suppose that my informant is lying or deceived, since what she says seems flagrantly to violate the laws of science; but if I have heard many such reports, and what my informant says conforms to the pattern of earlier cases that I have heard, I may find it more economical to believe that she is telling the truth, than that so many people, quite independently of one another, should lie and be deceived in such a pointless manner yet to much the same effect. Rather similarly, if one believes on independent grounds that there is a God, and if one considers that such a God would be very likely to reveal something of the divine nature and will; and if one thinks that there is a good case for claiming that such a revelation has taken place in the events which the New Testament purports to describe; then it might be more natural, and indeed more rational, to expect the narratives to be relatively veracious, than if one had no such beliefs. Such reasoning, *pace* John Collins,<sup>52</sup> is neither overtly nor subtly circular; it does not assume the truth of the Catholic or Christian faith, in order to argue for it.

Dummett compares the 'astonishing and conceptually perplexing tenets' which are central to Christian faith with those of modern physics, pointing out that the ordinary exercise of human reason on the data presented to our senses would never have come up with either.<sup>53</sup> On the basis of this remark, Collins accuses him of 'flirting' with 'blatant irrationalism'.<sup>54</sup> I think this is a mistake. What we have in modern physics is not due to the *ordinary*, but rather to the *intensely protracted*

*and strenuous*, exercise of human reason on the evidence of the senses. Dummett's point is that, in the light of modern physics, we should not be surprised to find that the deep truths about things, including God, are not easily intelligible or obvious to anyone on brief reflection. But this by no means implies that they are not at all subject to assessment by reason.

A couple more fugitive points seem to be worth making about this important and fascinating volume. Kretzmann's dissection of Adela Collins' argument, setting out clearly as it does its premises, its conclusions, and the nature of its inferences, seems to me a model of the kind of service that a philosopher can perform for a biblical critic. Donahue's survey of recent Catholic approaches to the Bible, and his depiction of the movement away from historical to other sorts of criticism, is interesting and valuable in itself; but should not lull the reader into assuming that satisfactory solutions have been found to the historical questions, and the problem of the bearing of these on Christian and Catholic faith, which has been my main concern in this article.

- 1 Edited by Thomas P. Elint and Eleonore Stump. University of Notre Dame Press, 1993. References not otherwise assigned will be to this book.
- 2 4-5.
- 3 9.
- 4 5.
- 5 15.
- 6 18-19.
- 7 13.
- 8 23-4.
- 9 25, 27-8.
- 10 26.
- 11 29.
- 12 25, 29.
- 13 24.
- 14 33.
- 15 37-58.
- 16 59-70.
- 17 77-100.
- 18 101-105.
- 19 107-140.
- 20 141-150.
- 21 151-2.
- 22 159-190.
- 23 172-3
- 24 175.
- 25 173-4.
- 26 191-7.
- 27 201-24.
- 28 212-3.
- 29 225-34.

- 30 235–73.
- 31 275–81.
- 32 285–313.
- 33 315–25.
- 34 Cf. his *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco 1978).
- 35 Cf. 23, 27. I think it is rather odd of John Collins both to imply that the average Catholic layperson is a myth, and to attribute to her assumptions on the relation of faith to the Jesus of history quite different from those of Dummett.
- 36 I tried to show this in *Sense, Nonsense and Christianity* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 250–270.
- 37 The label is a rather unfortunate one, since, in the present climate of critical opinion, a defense of the basic historicity of the Gospels may well seem a more 'radical' option than its alternative. But it will have to do for want of a better.
- 38 16. I believe that Dummett underestimates the prevalence of the convention of pseudonymity in the ancient world, and its relevance to the study of the documents of the New Testament (16–17); John Collins was right to point this out (28).
- 39 211–12.
- 40 Cf. 212.
- 41 6.
- 42 24.
- 43 23.
- 44 Cf. Raymond Brown's witty remark, that authors who maintain that John is not to be taken seriously as a historical witness 'represent an uncritical traditionalism which arises with age, even in heterodoxy.' (*New Testament Essays*, Milwaukee 1965, 143).
- 45 Cf. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge 1963); Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (New York 1960); Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids, 1969); Robinson, *The Priority of John*. (London 1985). Dodd in particular argues in meticulous detail that many of the sayings attributed to Jesus by John derive from very early strata of the tradition, and that these often expound or presuppose specifically Johannine doctrines (*Historical Tradition*, 115, 321, 419–20, 428). Collins will have it that the ordinary reader of the Gospels can 'see' that the Johannine discourses are unlikely to derive from Jesus, because they are so unlike the Synoptic sayings (27). I find it a little curious that he attributes to the ordinary reader authority greater than Dodd's. Also, I am surprised that he thinks that the fact that the term 'son of God' is used in so many ways in Scripture has any bearing on Dummett's argument, since it is clear, as Collins himself admits, that the expression is meant in a special sense when applied by the New Testament authors to Jesus (loc. cit.).
- 46 Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge 1953), 466.
- 47 *New Testament Essays*, (Milwaukee 1965), 143.
- 48 23.
- 49 Butler, *The Originality of Saint Matthew* (Cambridge 1951); Parker, *The Gospel Before Mark* (Chicago 1953); Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem* (London 1964); Rist, *The Independence of Matthew and Mark* (Cambridge, 1978); Wenham, *The Redating of Matthew, Mark and Luke* (London 1991).
- 50 *The Redating of the New Testament* (London 1976). Incidentally, it seems to me that Robinson is as brilliant as a historian as he is piddling as a theologian.
- 51 Cf. p. xxvi of the Introduction.
- 52 29.
- 53 7.
- 54 25.