

Theology and Reason

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I had anticipated learning from the contributions of others to the debate initiated last autumn in *New Blackfriars* by Professor Nicholas Lash and me (the debate on what has been called 'the liberal consensus')¹ without re-entering that debate soon, if ever. The scrupulous courtesy of Fr. Timothy Radcliffe's article in the March issue², in which he discusses whether there is such a 'consensus' among Catholic biblical scholars, makes it easy to do that. However, I have found it impossible to let the remarks of Mr. Joseph Fitzpatrick in his March article³, based on the views of Bernard Lonergan, pass without protest.

Mr. Fitzpatrick's article appears to me to encourage hostility to reason itself. He does not openly declare himself an enemy to reason, and I have no doubt would sincerely repudiate such a charge: but, all the same, what he wrote will surely reinforce hostility to it on the part of others. A large part of his contention is that, in theology, and, by implication, in other disciplines as well, deductive reasoning should be demoted. Anyone who puts forward such a thesis needs to spell out with great care exactly what he means by it if he is not to be taken, or mistaken, for an enemy of reason; and Mr. Fitzpatrick exercises very little care. He objects to 'the habit among Catholic theologians of arriving at conclusions by often dubious deductive reasoning' (p. 134). We have here, at the outset of his attack on the use of deductive reasoning in theology, a vital ambiguity. Is Fitzpatrick objecting to *dubious* deductive reasoning simply because it is dubious? If so, who could quarrel with him? Or is it, rather, their using deductive reasoning at all that he objects to, even if he thinks it worse when their reasoning is dubious? This stronger interpretation seems to be the right one: for he immediately goes on to commend Lonergan for 'somewhat rudely' demoting deductive reasoning in theology (p. 135), and this could hardly obtain any support from a mere rebuke to dubious reasoning.

The strong interpretation is confirmed by the comments Fitzpatrick makes when he turns his attention to me. It is characteristic of my approach, he says, that

the argument is presented in the deductive mode: 'If ... then ...
If ... then ...'. (p. 136)

In what other manner, one might ask, can an *argument* be presented? Does Fitzpatrick envisage an argument in a non-deductive mode? What would such an argument be like? It can hardly have escaped Mr. Fitzpatrick that, in my reply to Professor Lash, I was defending myself from the charge that,

in my first article, I had committed a series of non-sequiturs. How else was I to reply but by spelling out my arguments? No doubt, if I had replied to Professor Lash, 'I was not claiming anything so crude as that my conclusions *followed* from my premisses: I was simply displaying my theological insight', my answer would have been more to Mr. Fitzpatrick's taste.

Fitzpatrick does not, indeed, cite any evidently valid arguments whose premisses he endorses but whose conclusions he invites his readers to repudiate. Those who decry the use of logical reasoning seldom do, rightly sensing that that would be too much for those readers to stomach. The only actual examples he gives of arguments he rejects are:

The church teaches X;
the church was founded by God:
therefore X is true.

and

The bible says X;
the bible is the inspired word of God:
therefore X is true.

(p. 134)

Of these, the first needs additional premisses to be converted into a logically valid argument, while the validity of the second depends upon the selection of a quite particular definition of the word 'inspired'. As his two examples illustrate, Fitzpatrick particularly objects to appeals to the authority of dogmatic definitions or of Scripture, including the words of Christ: but the overt *ground* of his objection is not that the additional premisses are false, or the tacit definition incorrect, but simply that such appeals involve 'the logico-deductive method of argumentation'. It would be impossible to read aloud the sentence ending ' "If ... then ... If ... then ..." ' quoted above save in a jeering tone; nor can one read it silently without hearing the jeer behind it. At what is Fitzpatrick jeering? At faulty or invalid reasoning? No, for that is not the accusation: he is jeering at reasoning as such. By doing so, he encourages hostility to reason, whether he means to or not. The friends of reason have nothing to learn from such remarks; but its enemies are confirmed in their disposition not even to consider rational argument: as soon as they see it coming up, they can set it aside without bothering to read it, saying to themselves, 'Oh, yet more "If ... then ... if ... then" '.

It is important that it is deductive reasoning that Fitzpatrick disparages. Inductive reasoning or plausible reasoning aims to establish its conclusions only with probability; but deductive reasoning, if valid, establishes its conclusions without any opening for rationally cavilling at them. Of course, no reasoning can be better than its premisses: if they are not true, we have no ground at all to accept the conclusion. But a complaint about the premisses appealed to is not a complaint about the procedure of deductive reasoning: on what score, then, can Fitzpatrick propose that that procedure be 'demoted'?

More exactly, what is meant by 'demotion'? There are topics concerning which deductive reasoning plays a less important role in discovering the truth than it does concerning others; but Fitzpatrick appears to suppose that one can simply ignore an argument when it relates to such a topic. Logical argument is never to be ignored; even if there is direct evidence for the falsity of the conclusion, that will imply the falsity of the premisses, given that the argument was valid. Nevertheless, in a sphere of enquiry in which direct evidence can usually be obtained, reasoning, whether deductive or inductive, indeed shrinks in importance. In natural history, for example, we shall seldom need to deduce the mating habits of the vole or the diet of the hedgehog, for we can observe these creatures. It is when we have a *direct* and highly *reliable* method of discovering whatever we want to know that we can, to a large extent, dispense with argumentation—with 'logico-deductive argumentation', as it is called by Fitzpatrick (p. 135), who is, apparently, familiar with some other variety.

In thus implicitly opposing to deductive reasoning more direct means of arriving at the truth, Mr. Fitzpatrick is on strong epistemological ground: we must have ways of finding out what is so otherwise than by reasoning, or where should we obtain our premisses? Let us allow that someone who appeals to Scripture or to the magisterium of the Church may be said to be implicitly engaged in reasoning deductively, even if he does not so set out his argument. One who relies on observation is not so engaged, however. We could not set out his appeal to it thus:

I have seen a hedgehog eating dandelions;
what I see really happens:
therefore hedgehogs sometimes eat dandelions.

The appeal to observation therefore escapes the rebuke of invoking the abhorred logico-deductive method.

What, then, is the direct and reliable method for discovering theological truths of which Mr. Fitzpatrick believes himself to be in possession, that method the deliverances of which do not involve us even implicitly in making any inferences? Theological enquiry has, according to Fitzpatrick, two phases, a positive and a normative one (p. 127). The positive phase, he says, is a purely empirical investigation, and as such, 'can be done by anyone' (p. 129): in other words, its results will be as acceptable to unbelievers as to believers. I am accused of contempt for this positive phase (p. 136), of which more later: but, plainly, it is not here that we are to find that special source of theological knowledge that renders deductive argument superfluous. On the contrary, most empirical enquiry demands a substantial ingredient of inferential reasoning, which will surely be involved in what Fitzpatrick recognises as its fourth stage, dialectic. It is therefore to the second, normative, phase that we have to turn.

'This second, normative division of theology will be determined by the presence or absence of conversion', Fitzpatrick says (p. 129); but he surely

means simply by its presence, for he tells us that ‘authentic conversion provides the pivot from the positive to the normative phase of theology’ (p. 129). By ‘conversion’ he means ‘the state of being in love with God, of responding to God’s free gift of his love’. ‘Conversion’, he says ‘is foundational’: ‘it provides the faith context in which one decides to give intellectual assent to certain beliefs and teachings’ (p. 129).

We should here take care to attend to what is being claimed. Fitzpatrick is not merely maintaining that the better person you are, and, specifically, the more advanced you are in the love of God, the better you are likely to be at theology. That is doubtless true: but Mr. Fitzpatrick has implicitly undertaken to cite a means of attaining theological truths which, presumably because it constitutes direct apprehension of those truths, will make deductive reasoning unnecessary: the equivalent for theology of observation for natural history. It will make unnecessary even that implicit inferential reasoning that occurs when anyone appeals to Scripture or to the teaching of the Church. Such a claim is very strong. And the trouble with the means that Fitzpatrick claims will do this is that it can do so at best only for the individual concerned: that individual, namely, who has attained the requisite degree of love of God. It is not enough to say that such an individual is able to give assent to certain beliefs, something which, after all, all Christians do. Rather, Fitzpatrick needs to claim that such a person can know that his interpretations of those beliefs are true without having to engage in any reasoning in support of them or to attend to any reasoning that controverts them. Even so, when he tries to communicate his beliefs to others who do not claim to have attained the same spiritual level, he will have to demand of them that they have recourse to reasoning. Even the convinced disciples of such a theologian must resort to it at least to the same degree as one who appeals to the teaching of our Lord as recorded in the Gospels. They must argue:

Fr. A says X;

Fr. A has undergone an authentic conversion:
therefore X is true.

This inference, of just the form condemned by Mr. Fitzpatrick, would be much shakier than:

Professor B says he saw hedgehogs eating dandelions;
Professor B is usually truthful:
therefore hedgehogs sometimes eat dandelions.

Not only do I have the same faculty of observing hedgehogs as Professor B: I also know that those who observe them usually agree about what they see, and I know that Professor B knows that. Similar happy conditions do not obtain for authentically converted theologians.

We must conclude, therefore, that Mr. Fitzpatrick fails to make out his case against the use of deductive reasoning in theology. It does not follow that all his recommendations for how to proceed in theology are unsound,

and to these I now turn. One such recommendation is a careful empirical enquiry in preparation for the 'normative' phase (p. 128). Mr. Fitzpatrick twice tells his readers that I have no respect for scholarship (p. 136). Since I have devoted my entire life to scholarship, I am affronted by his calling my dedication to it in question: but what he means to convey is that I reject his thesis of the autonomy of empirical enquiry in theology.

Fitzpatrick holds that empirical facts are relevant to theological conclusions, and must be established, by empirical means on which acceptance or rejection of the Christian faith has no bearing, *before* we enter 'the faith context'. As an example of this, Fitzpatrick rebukes me for taking a 'short way with the vast and complex literature on the subject of "the Son of Man"' (p. 136). Indeed, I did not go into the arguments of those who maintain that, when Jesus used the phrase, he was not referring to himself. Nor did I directly say that they were wrong: I said that, if they were right, the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels have been so garbled that we cannot know for sure what he said and did not say. To judge whether that conditional statement is true does not appear to me to require any expertise, let alone the perusal of a vast and complex literature, but only a reading of the Gospels. I did not deny that exegetes have opinions, and put forward arguments, about which statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels may actually have been made by him: I said only that, if he did not refer to himself as 'Son of Man', we cannot *know* what he said about anything.

Fitzpatrick is admonishing two distinct classes of people: the experts and the non-experts. His message to the non-experts is that they shall form no judgement on matters subject to empirical investigation unless they first qualify themselves as experts, or presumably, until the experts reach a consensus, which the non-expert is bound to accept. His message to the experts is that they should investigate the same matters without regard to 'the faith context', in a manner available to anyone, whatever his religious beliefs or lack of belief. How sound is this precept? As a bar to the temptation to distort the empirical data, to minimise or misrepresent what might be used as an argument against Catholic belief, to exaggerate whatever can be used in its support, it is undoubtedly one to which every scholar should be faithful. But, as a principle for the formation of judgements from the data, it seems to me fallacious. Occasionally, the empirical evidence for some conclusion is overwhelming; and then any rational person must bow to it. For the most part, however, the judgements of Biblical exegetes are not based on overwhelming evidence, but on the assessment of probabilities: a hypothesis is judged to be more probable than not, or, often, not even that, but merely the most probable of several alternatives. And when probabilities are up for assessment, anyone is entitled, indeed required, to take into account any belief he has that bears on the degree of probability. A non-Christian exegete can entertain the possibility that one or more of the Evangelists was a fraudulent impostor,

intent on inducing others to take as fact that what he knew not to be true; or that he had been gullibly taken in by some impostor; or that he had swallowed as fact stories utterly garbled by oral transmission: and he may estimate one or another of these hypotheses as the most probable in the light of the known data, because he attaches no antecedent improbability to them. Must a Christian exegete then do the same? That is, must he abstain from advertng to his Christian belief in estimating what is the most probable hypothesis? According to Fitzpatrick, he must: to do otherwise would be to 'fail in the respect due to the autonomy' of empirical scholarship (p. 136). In my view, on the contrary, he is behaving quite irrationally if he does so.

As all writers on probability inform us, an assessment of probability should be made relatively to the 'total evidence'; and this must mean the totality of our relevant beliefs. For one who accepts the Christian religion, the antecedent probability of hypotheses of the kind just listed is extremely low: and so their probability in the light of data that would be explained by them is likely also to be lower than that of alternative explanations that the non-Christian scholar would judge to be less probable. It is no breach of intellectual integrity for the Christian exegete to adopt one of these alternative explanations. On the contrary, it will be irrational of him to insist on adopting a hypothesis on the ground that, if he did not hold the religious beliefs that he does, that hypothesis would appear to him the most probable. In the thinking of anyone who has a religious faith, there should be an interplay between faith and reason that in no way dilutes the demands of reason. The rigid segmentation of his thinking that Fitzpatrick demands, on the authority of Lonergan—first reason with no acknowledgement of faith, then faith with no appeal to reason (cf. p. 129)—can result only in conclusions consonant neither with faith nor with reason.

The methodology advocated by Fitzpatrick is indeed that followed by most Catholic Biblical exegetes, with one reservation. Some more or less frankly advance the same conclusions as those of the most sceptical agnostic: they do not use such gross language as to say that the Evangelists were unscrupulous liars, but that is what, though more diplomatically expressed, their conclusions amount to. Many more first conduct the positive phase of their enquiries in the manner recommended by Fitzpatrick, and so arrive at essentially the same conclusions concerning the facts behind the Gospel accounts; but they then explain them by appeal to the concept of the literary genre. Now Fitzpatrick claims to sum up one of my shortcomings by a quotation from Lonergan:

People with little notion of modern scholarship can urge that attending to the literary genre of biblical writings is just a fraudulent device for rejecting the plain meaning of scripture.
(p. 136)

In so doing, he chooses to ignore my remark, in my reply to Professor Lash,
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that:

The appeal to literary genres in interpreting Scripture was in origin well based.⁴

It is obviously foolish to neglect to ask the question, 'How was this work meant to be understood?', or, more specifically, 'Was there a definite literary convention to which it was intended to conform?'. That does not give anyone a licence to defend every interpretation, however implausible, by brandishing the words 'literary genre'. I claimed that use of the concept had degenerated, not into a fraudulent device, but into an 'unconscious mechanism' for protecting any conclusion about the original facts from implying dishonesty or gross error on the part of the New Testament writers. Fitzpatrick offers no refutation of that charge. Frequently, an alleged literary convention is invoked without any attempt to explain how it was supposed to work, to cite any other example of it or, most importantly, to show that the New Testament work said to exemplify it was ever understood by anyone in accordance with it; for, on anyone's account, the existence of those conventions was very rapidly forgotten. Until these omissions are rectified, the claim that one or another such convention existed can carry no weight.

Consider, for instance, one who believes that the body of Jesus never left the tomb, but lay and decomposed there, yet who invokes the notion of a literary genre in order to deny that the New Testament accounts are untruthful. He must hold that when, in Acts, Luke makes St. Peter say to the crowd, 'No-one can deny that the patriarch David himself is dead and buried: his tomb is still with us', as part of an argument that the words 'Thou shalt not suffer thy holy one to see corruption' referred prophetically to Jesus, he was not implying that Peter said anything like that; he could not have done, since his hearers would have known that Jesus was dead and buried. Luke must have been employing a genre according to which that was a way of conveying that Peter (whether or not he made any speech) was convinced that Jesus was somehow alive with God. It is perplexing that Fitzpatrick should wish to defend appeals to literary genres of such a kind, for they are incompatible with his own methodological precepts. It would not occur to a non-Christian exegete to advance such a hypothesis: he would merely say that Luke was engaged in persuading readers at another time and place to give credit to an event that had not in fact occurred. The alleged literary genre is invoked solely in order to avoid stigmatising the author as dishonest: it is therefore a prime example of what Fitzpatrick so abhors, the 'confusion of doctrinal matters with matters of empirical scholarship' (p. 136).

So much for Mr. Fitzpatrick's counsel to the experts: what of the non-experts? Suppose that a Christian, not familiar with the vast and complex literature about the phrase 'the Son of Man', comes to the conclusion I came to: the conclusion, namely, that if Jesus was not speaking of himself when

he used the phrase, then we cannot claim to know what he taught. Can he or can he not base on that conclusion any belief or even opinion about how Jesus did intend the phrase? Not according to Fitzpatrick: to do that, he would first need to master the vast and complex literature. Until he has done so, or until the exegetes have attained a consensus on the question, he will be forced to treat it as a possibility that our Lord's words in the Gospels are garbled, and that we cannot know what he taught. Only so can he manifest that respect for the autonomy of empirical enquiry that Fitzpatrick would have him show.

What of his faith meanwhile? He believed that he could encounter Christ in the Gospels; but now he is required to accept the possibility that this was an illusion. If Christ never said or did the things the Evangelists recorded him as saying and doing, or anything like them, we do not hear his voice or come face to face with him in the Gospels, but only with the way they saw him, just as, in art, we meet only with Christ as Fra Angelico saw him, as Michelangelo saw him, as Rembrandt saw him. Must our Christian believer's ignorance of the vast and complex literature compel him to stand mute before this devastating conclusion?

I say that neither Lonergan nor Fitzpatrick has either authority or rational ground to demand that he do so. I say that he is entitled to reject the conclusion, and hence to infer, without scrutiny of the critical literature, that those exegetes who have hypothesised that Jesus did not refer to himself as 'Son of Man' are in error. His reasoning will not be based on empirical data, and will not fend off faith from intruding into empirical questions; but, then, there was never any valid ground for requiring that it should. His reasoning is that God, having sent his Son into the world to bear witness to the truth, would not have allowed the records of that testimony to consist, for whatever reason, in large part of false reports: whether through the dishonesty of the authors of those records, or through their mistakes, or through their use of obscure literary conventions that would, within a very short time, and for a very long time, be misunderstood. That is an argument from a proposition of faith to an empirical conclusion, and none the worse for that. It does not purport to establish its conclusion with certainty, but only with probability; but, until the exegetes can claim more for *their* conclusions, that will do very well to be going on with. If our believer knows a little about the exegetes, he will know that most of them adopt the misguided methodology advocated by Fitzpatrick: that their deliberate policy is to opt for those conclusions which an unbeliever would find most probable, and to refuse to bring their faith to bear upon their critique of scriptural texts. Knowing that, he will be all the less inclined to let his beliefs wait upon their pronouncements; and he will be quite right.

Mr. Fitzpatrick rebukes me for my 'preoccupation with doctrine', with what we are required to believe (p. 136). The notion of being required to believe something would be abhorrent if the requirement were not a ground

to think it true: concern for what we are required to believe is concern for what we have reason to believe in virtue of its being warranted as part of the Christian faith. Fitzpatrick takes little pains to report correctly my remarks on the paramountcy of unity, stating that 'the unity of the Church is a matter of doctrine' (p. 135). It is not, in the first instance, a matter of doctrine, and I did not so represent it: it is a matter of membership of a single body. My argument was, rather, that we could not have, as I believe we have, an absolute obligation not, of our own accord, to separate ourselves from the body of the Church unless we also had a guarantee that whatever it required us to believe, as a condition of membership, was true. Very oddly, Mr. Fitzpatrick further labels me misguided for my 'rebuke of Raymond Brown for failing to tell us what we are required to believe' (p. 136). The criticism is odd, because an investigation of whether a given doctrine had been presented as part of the Church's infallible teaching would seem well within the scope of an empirical enquiry that 'can be done by anyone': only the decision whether, if so, to believe it would lie beyond its scope. And that was precisely what, in the article of 1972 which I expressly cited, Fr. Brown was discussing. In other places, he has confined himself to asking whether the virginity of the Mother of God is demonstrable from Scripture; but in that article he reviewed the question in all its aspects, specifically enquiring whether it is guaranteed by the magisterium of the Church. I did not criticise Fr. Brown for raising this question, still less for failing to raise it: I objected that he gave what still appears to me to be palpably the wrong answer.⁵

What Professor Lash called 'the forces of integralist repression' within the Catholic Church have undoubtedly been oppressive in the past. Today the overweening pretensions of the exegetes, who claim an authority no scholarly attainments could confer upon them, have become oppressive in their turn. But, like the house built upon sand, their pretended authority has no foundation; if sufficiently many people have the courage to stand up and blow upon it, it will fall, and a rather discreditable episode will be over.

- 1 Michael Dummett, 'A Remarkable Consensus', *New Blackfriars* Vol. 68 No. 809 (October 1987), pp. 424—431.
- Nicholas Lash, 'A Leaky Sort of Thing? The divisiveness of Michael Dummett', Vol 68 No. 811 (December 1987), pp. 552—557.
- Michael Dummett, 'Unsafe Premises: a reply to Nicholas Lash', *ibid.* pp. 558—566.
- 2 Timothy Radcliffe OP, 'Interrogating the Consensus: a response to Michael Dummett', Vol 69 No. 814 (March 1988), pp. 116—126.
- 3 Joseph Fitzpatrick, 'Lonergan's Method and the Dummett-Lash Dispute', *ibid.* 126—138.
- 4 Vol. 68 No. 811 (December 1987), p. 560.
- 5 *ibid.* pp. 560, 564.

Editor: We will be publishing a short response from Mr. Joseph Fitzpatrick in our June issue.