

Preface

The mind-set of a handful of highly-placed ecclesiastics has been the target for many trenchant and frequently justified words—most recently the ‘Cologne Declaration’ signed by 163 theologians of the German-speaking world and published on 27 January, which is protesting at the Vatican’s disregard of the views of local churches and its ways of trying to control theology and theologians. Unfortunately it is not possible to plant on a few individuals all the blame for the narrowing during these past years both of what counts as Catholic teaching and of the range of people qualified to say what Catholic teaching is. There have been other and deeper causes too.

Consciously or unconsciously, the Church is increasingly modelling itself on the modern state, and excessive proximity of central government is one of the features of advanced industrial societies. We are witnessing a steady undermining of ‘subsidiarity’. Thirty years ago it was taken for granted that there was a great variety of theological opinions. During the past two decades the old tool-kit of differentiations has disappeared and not been replaced, and this has been happening at the same time as integrist and voluntarist assumptions have been gaining an even stronger hold in the Church’s central government.

The five writers in this special issue would probably agree that, at the intellectual level, the only way of effectively counteracting the new monolithism is to show that it is a deviation from the Church’s authentic tradition. But in ‘What Counts as Catholic Teaching?’ we have, of course, only space for touching on a few basic issues—what do we mean by ‘the authentic tradition’, ‘teaching’, ‘unity’, ‘heresy’?

We open in the world of the New Testament, where the question ‘What must we believe? What in the inherited tradition must be preserved?’ was so urgent. Timothy Radcliffe OP, Prior Provincial of the English Dominicans, who has published before on the interrelationship of teaching and culture in early Christianity, looks at how some of the first Christians tried to preserve tradition in a changing world. He argues that they handled the problem in a different way from us, one that subverts ‘the dichotomy, so typical of the Enlightenment mind, between traditionalists, who preserve a deposit, and progressives, who cut themselves from the past’.

How orthodoxy is being protected in the present-day Catholic Church is the subject of the next article, ‘Who does the Teaching in the Church?’. Its author is another Dominican, Edmund Hill OP, of Lesotho, whose most recent book is *Ministry and Authority in the Catholic Church* (Chapman). He points out the inadequacy of the

modern Church's notion of 'teaching', and criticises the term 'magisterium' as it has been used in recent times.

'To believe in the "infallibility" of the Church is not to suppose that we are reliable, but that God is.' So Nicholas Lash, Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, begins the third contribution, 'The Difficulty of Making Sense'. We know what needs to be said, but how to say it *effectively* today—i.e. talk theology in the modern world—is no easy matter. The teacher has to recognise the importance of learning and what learning is, and recover the link (long lost) between 'teaching' and 'spirituality'. Teaching should respect both those it serves and the materials with which it works; in other words, it should be *courteous* (Professor Lash gives examples which he thinks are not). We must be 'permanently mindful of our pupil-status before the mystery of God.'

But might we then become reluctant to say what Christian truth is and is not? Has pluralism today no limits? This question, dealt with in the fourth article, certainly does not only trouble Roman Catholics. An Anglican, Rowan Williams, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford, asks if there are 'strictly *theological* criteria immediately available to discriminate among varieties of "Christianity" '.

If we believe there is a common hope and a common vocation for human beings, not everything is compatible with Christian theology. But, asks Professor Williams, how do we articulate limits and criteria? Following Dietrich Ritschl, he thinks the process of answering the question 'What counts as a mistake?' makes us aware of our implicit axioms. He considers that more than Ritschl implies can be said about 'what positively conditions the search for some articulation of this elusive unity': the conviction that we all share a common hope and vocation 'is more than just a pious sentiment'. However, he believes that the search for a *theological* unity in what we say 'involves a high degree of sustained conversation with the history of ethics and spirituality'.

A historical approach is adopted in 'The Function of Heresy', the closing article, which has been written by Paul Parvis OP, now Prior of Blackfriars, Oxford, and Lecturer there in Patristics. It has been impossible to tell in advance what developments in Christian thought were going to be 'heresy', he argues. 'In the nature of the theological task, it must be by indirection that we find direction out. ... The function, the vocation, of heretics is to suffer defeat, that, through the failure of their attempts to speak, the words of others might find meaning.'

The Cologne Declaration say the Church 'is not a city under siege'. What counts as Catholic teaching has never been absolutely clear, but rationed-out ammunition it is surely not. Rather, maybe, search-lights?

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