

The Certainty of Change: questioning Brown's answer to Dummett's problem

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The seductions of centrism

Professor Michael Dummett, in the *New Blackfriars* article last October which opened what is now quite a long debate, questioned the propriety of Catholic theologians espousing views which contradict traditional Catholic beliefs; to contradict such pronouncements in his opinion makes nonsense of belonging to the Catholic Church¹. It was Thomas Sheehan's 1984 article, arguing that the 'liberal consensus' among Catholic biblical scholars is irreconcilable with traditional or official Catholicism, which prompted Dummett to write in the first place, and it has been mentioned several times since then in the debate².

Here I would like to draw attention to the way an eminent scripture scholar, Professor Raymond Brown, responds to Sheehan's charge. Brown is a particularly good example to consider, firstly because he has frequently addressed himself to precisely this issue, but mainly because among Catholic scholars his standing is unquestioned. Professor Nicholas Lash, in his response to Dummett, wrote—surely correctly—that Brown's 'massive erudition, unswerving loyalty to Catholic Christianity, and endless painstaking judiciousness of judgement have made him (in seminaries and elsewhere) the most widely respected Catholic New Testament scholar in the English-speaking world'³.

Consider how Brown addresses this problem of the apparent contradiction between traditional Catholicism and what biblical scholars are now saying. First, he repudiates the picture of Catholic scholarship painted by Sheehan. The 'liberal consensus' among Catholic scholars, says Brown, is a figment of Sheehan's imagination. As he says again in a March letter quoted by Fr Timothy Radcliffe in 'Interrogating the Consensus'⁴, the vast majority of Catholic scholars are 'centrists', like himself. Although I think that statement can be seriously challenged, I will let it stand, for it is the next part of Brown's answer that concerns me here. Centrist scholarship, continues Brown, has not denied traditional doctrines; it has merely modified the way they are understood. The beliefs remain; they have simply been nuanced in the light of the conclusions of modern scholarship. We still hold those truths the Church has always taught, although we may spell them out in a slightly more contemporary

330

idiom.

Consider some of Brown's statements on the following traditional beliefs regarding the founding and life of the Church and the nature of revelation.

Regarding the belief that *Jesus founded the Church*, he says that Jesus, in his lifetime, gathered around him a community of disciples as a renewed Israel, and afterwards these disciples, in imitation of Jesus's own baptism, took the step of requiring a visible sign for adherents to Jesus; this circle of adherents soon adopted the term 'church'. 'When understood with nuance, then,' he goes on to say, 'the proposition that Jesus Christ founded the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is not necessarily foreign to modern exegetes of the New Testament.' So Sheehan's claim that scholars deny the doctrine 'presupposes a simplistic understanding of church foundation, involving *explicit* intention on Jesus's part during his ministry.'⁵

Next, he says, speaking of the belief that *the bishops are the successors of the apostles*, that the emergence of the pattern of one bishop over a group of presbyters was late-first to second century, but centrist scholars would not say that this negated the Church doctrine. 'Yet', he remarks, these scholars 'would insist that the biblical evidence carefully evaluated does nuance the doctrine' and challenge 'a historically naive understanding of apostolic succession'⁶.

Going on to the belief that *Christ established the apostles as priests at the Last Supper*, he says that the view that Jesus had *not* clearly thought out the Last Supper the continuing eucharists of the church and the question of who would preside at them does not in his opinion conflict with the teaching of Trent. The teaching 'simply demands nuance'⁷. And the doctrinal statement *Christ instituted the seven sacraments* does not tell us 'that the earthly Jesus had a clear notion of sacrament as we have come to understand it' and that he thought explicitly of seven, but tells us the number of sacred actions 'to be regarded as not merely of church origin but as essential to communicating the eternal life brought by Jesus Christ'⁸.

And regarding the claim that *revelation closed with the death of the last apostle*, he says he would have great difficulty with the principle if it were 'taken to imply that the apostles or anyone else in the first century understood or formulated revelation completely', but not if it meant 'that God gave us His Son as the ultimate self-revelation'⁹.

In all these instances, Brown claims that the doctrine is true, and we still hold it; scholarship has just nuanced it. Thus Brown can say 'I would maintain that there is *no irreconcilable conflict* between the results of Catholic historical-critical exegesis and a nuanced understanding of Catholic dogma.'¹⁰ And he hopes that, far from spreading the canard that Catholic biblical scholars are destroying traditional beliefs, 'in the future

more Catholics will be able to make distinctions that will enable them to see the extent to which modern Catholic critical exegesis supports a properly nuanced understanding of church dogmas.¹¹ This way of looking at it adequately solves the problem, so adequately, in fact, that Brown can write: 'It is puzzling, then, why intelligent people at each end of the Catholic spectrum, conservative and liberal, state sweepingly that biblical scholars deny apostolic succession ... (or) the virginal conception, bodily resurrection, sacraments, Mary etc.'¹²

But has Brown solved the problem? Has he even addressed it? Surely all Brown preserves is a formula of words? All that 'Catholic centrist exegesis' supports is a verbal formula. Could it not be argued that in many of the examples given above, the understanding that Brown discounts or says is no longer required or even tenable, is the very understanding that the formula was originally devised to convey? And conversely, could it not be argued that the meaning Brown now gives to the formula has in the past been officially repudiated? The meaning Brown gives to 'Christ founded the Church', for example, is more or less what Pius X wanted to condemn only eighty years ago (*Lamentabili*, 52). Brown's approach may preserve a formula, but what the Fathers, or Augustine, or Aquinas, or the Magisterium, *meant* by the formula has been radically altered. And there, surely, lies the real problem. That problem Brown hasn't addressed at all. Far from solving the problem of doctrinal change, he has merely skated over it.

Further doubts about the adequacy of Brown's approach arise from a certain inconsistency in applying it. Consider another doctrine which has undergone considerable change. We who live after the rise of the physical and historical sciences can no longer hold 'the Christian doctrine of creation' in the way our forefathers did. But consider how Brown treats this doctrine:

The centrist view presupposes that we can change our interpretation of Genesis and implicitly that our Christian ancestors were wrong when they thought that the doctrine of creation told them the time and manner of cosmic and human origins. In other words, the centrist Christian is led to realize that what was once thought to be a doctrine can later be discovered not to be a doctrine.¹³

Here Brown has moved away from preserving a formula, and focussed on the understanding behind it, which he is prepared to admit was wrong. This is a new approach altogether. The whole point of the approach which sees dogmatic change as a 'nuancing' is surely that it enables us to avoid imputing error; we can view prior understandings as basically correct, although blunt, clumsy and lacking sophistication. But if we can admit that our Christian ancestors were wrong in their understanding of creation, why can we not say that they were wrong in their understanding

of apostolic succession, or of the apostles' ordination? Why can we not say—as Brown pointedly avoided saying—that Pius X was wrong in his understanding of the Church's institution by Christ? Why was the traditional understanding of creation wrong, while the other traditional beliefs only in need of nuancing?

The real flaw in Brown's approach, however, is evident from the conclusion of this quotation on creation. Brown admits that what was once understood to be a doctrine may turn out not to be a doctrine at all. Here he goes beyond dealing in formulae which may be given different meanings. Here he admits that even in a case where a definite meaning for the formula can be agreed on by all (and taught officially? backed with anathemas?), we are on no firmer ground, because that can later be repudiated too. And how do we know when something considered a doctrine is to be considered a doctrine no longer? Someone familiar with the history of Catholic biblical study might reply: when it becomes obviously untenable. After this admission, one wonders what remains of Brown's approach. After that, one can surely talk of doctrine only in a far looser sense than Brown obviously wants to.

Elsewhere, in a footnote, Brown makes some remarks which confuse the issue still further. Speaking of the shifts in Catholic thought, he speaks of the attempts

gracefully to retain what was salvageable from the past and to move in a new direction with as little friction as possible. To those for whom it is a doctrinal issue that the Church never changes, one must repeat Galileo's *sotto voce* response when told that it was a doctrinal issue that the earth does not move: '*E pur si muove*' ('Nevertheless, it moves'). And the best proof of movement is the kind of biblical scholarship practised by ninety-five percent of Catholics writing today, a kind of scholarship that would not have been tolerated for a moment by church authorities in the first forty years of this century.¹⁴

This footnote raises some distinctly novel points. First, the last sentence hints that Sheehan's picture of a 'liberal consensus' irreconcilable with traditional Catholicism may contain more truth than Brown is usually ready to concede. Secondly, it allows that there is a genuine change in Catholic doctrine. Thirdly, and most importantly, Brown makes an admission which is crucial for any debate on change in Catholic doctrine; this is the admission that in any such discussion there is something of a hidden agenda. (Brown hinted at this agenda when he allowed above that we could *implicitly* admit our forebears were wrong about creation; why could we not admit it *explicitly*, or acknowledge it publicly?) In any Catholic discussion of doctrinal change, the whole self-understanding of Catholicism becomes part of the terms of reference for the debate. This self-understanding determines the way the issue is framed, the categories

that are used, and the limits within which the discussion is conducted. Tracing doctrinal change is never the neutral historical exercise that, say, describing changes in economic theory may be. All sorts of assumptions are determinative from the outset. In the belief that identifying some of these assumptions may open the way to breaking right out of traditional debate and set up the discussion along other, more productive, lines, I would like briefly to sketch three factors determining the traditional debate, namely, the idea of an authoritative past, the preoccupation with normative texts, and the premium on continuity.

The Authoritative Past

Christianity began in a world that revered the past. Tradition, therefore, needed no justifying in the ancient world. It authenticated itself just by being old. Antiquity itself was a sign of virtue and truth.

Paradoxically, although this was the ethos of the world into which Christianity was born, the earliest Christian generations did not have their eyes fixed on the past, but on the future, on the return of Jesus. But already by the time of Luke this hope of an imminent return was fading. Luke urged the Church to organise for a lengthy future. For this, it needed reliable guarantees of its proclamation. Luke singled out as the most reliable guarantors the eyewitnesses of the first generation, and pre-eminent among them the apostles. Thus arose the Christian consciousness that the apostles were the sole trustworthy witnesses to the original form of the Christian faith. And thus the Church's gaze came to be ever fixed *back there*, on its origins. This attitude became increasingly conscious and elaborate. Hegesippus helped the process with his metaphor of the Church as a virgin: 'They used to call the Church a virgin, for she had not yet been corrupted by vain teachings.'¹⁵ And Tertullian took this further. For him, truth comes first, falsification later. By definition, any innovation is false. 'Our teaching is not later; it is earlier than them all. In this lies the evidence of its truth.'¹⁶ Particularly after Origen, the allegorical method of interpreting scripture enabled the Church to accomplish in practice what its theory demanded.

Implicitly, and then explicitly, the past became determinative of the present and the future, and its judge. When the Protestant Reformers consciously purified their appeal to origins with their insistence on scripture alone, Counter-Reformation theology (paradoxically) almost outdid them in returning to roots. Consider Bossuet: 'There is no difficulty about recognising false doctrine: there is no argument about it; it is recognised at once, whenever it appears, merely because it is new.'¹⁷ This is the central point of his apologetics against the Reformation. He challenged Protestants to prove that the slightest change had ever occurred in dogmatic teaching during the history of the Catholic church. He promised that, if they could find even a single such change, he would concede the

argument and suppress his entire history. Bossuet was too sophisticated to claim that words like 'transubstantiation' were apostolic, but he insisted that the concept was, and that it had always been held with the same precision and clarity. It was a question merely of a difference in terms. This view was accepted almost without question by the Church of Bossuet's time¹⁸.

Newman of course, is of another epoch, but, again, his stress is on the essential sameness of successive manifestations of Christianity. Apparent differences between apostolic and later times were merely like the differences between a river near its source and the same river near its estuary, or between an acorn and its oak. But admitting even this degree of difference was suspect. As the modernist crisis developed, the denial of change became ever more insistent. Billot, perhaps the most influential Catholic theologian of the modernist era, saw faith as intellectual assent and theology as a deductive process. Later faith had merely deduced more from what had always been present¹⁹. The official Catholic attitude to change is still the traditional one; thus Paul VI: 'Novelty for us consists essentially in a return to genuine tradition.'²⁰

However, the western intellectual tradition has ceased to be oriented to or fixed on the past. The scientific mentality sees truth as something *out there ahead*, to be sought and discovered by experiments, questions and hypotheses.

In a culture experiencing reality in this way, the artificiality and arbitrariness of the traditional Christian attitude to the past stands out very clearly. For many in this cultural environment, to look to the past for truth or for normative guidance is no longer the natural unconscious stance it used to be. To think like that now requires a deliberate choice, a choice moreover that goes against current intellectual attitudes and the natural assumptions brought to bear in other areas of life and thought. The traditional Christian distrust of novelty, manifested in various ways by the Magisterium, Dummett and Brown, simply no longer rings true for many, and the basic assumption of a normative and authoritative past no longer seems quite so necessary or compelling.

Authoritative Texts

Christianity has not, however, just focussed on its origins generally; it has looked back to the Bible as its foundation document. This concern with written texts has been largely cultural as well. For example, through many centuries in the West Virgil was an *auctor* whose work became almost mystically revered; it was glossed, put into catenae and used as an oracle, so much so that it became part of the mental furniture of the Middle Ages. The general disposition to regard written authorities in this way played an important role in the development of the Christian attitude towards the Bible as *auctor par excellence*.

Now the interpretation of what have already been established as authoritative texts is an interpretation of a very special kind. If you have already established that a text is authoritative in some hard sense, you have committed yourself to finding an authoritatively acceptable meaning there, or at least one of a certain range of acceptable meanings. This, however, is not because of anything in the text; it is because (often solely because) of your prior assumptions.

To illustrate this point, consider the way the New Testament authors interpret the Old²¹. Normally studies of this question presume that the New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament, though culturally conditioned and specific to that era, was nevertheless a genuine interpretation of Old Testament texts; it may not be our way of doing it, but it was a genuine 'hermeneutic' for all that. But to say this is misleading, for it obscures what was really happening. For those early Christian interpreters—and for their Jewish contemporaries equally—the essence of the very diverse books they considered 'scripture' was that they contained esoteric knowledge or revelation from God, and that this revelation was for *them*. Moreover, since all these books pointed to *their* age as the time of fulfilment, all were presumed to provide a coherent scheme of compatible and interrelated predictions. These preconceptions formed the key to open the texts' secret treasures, and so were uniquely and all-pervasively determinative of any meaning uncovered. The early Christian writers were hardly interpreting texts. They were using their supreme authorities to provide the greatest possible authorization for positions derived essentially from elsewhere.

This attitude to the scriptures became part of the Christian consciousness, too. The allegorical exegesis of the fathers and the medievals is built on it. Failure to appreciate the all-determining importance of these preconceptions vitiates much writing about 'biblical hermeneutics'. So many presume that biblical interpretation has worked in the same way as interpreting other classics. But this is not so. Nobody has ever been under any obligation to find all Marx in Sophocles, all Freud in Cicero, or all Keynes in Augustine. To attempt to do so would be ludicrous. But traditionally Christians have felt themselves under just that constraint, to find all contemporary Christianity in the Bible. Sometimes the effect is only slightly less forced.

This attitude that Christians in general have traditionally brought to the Bible, Catholics have often extended to church documents. Catholic have felt this same obligation to find contemporary Catholicism there, or at least the intimations of contemporary Catholicism, or at the very least nothing incompatible with contemporary Catholicism. Again, these are presuppositions that become crucial factors in the activity of interpretation. Take, as an extreme example, Boniface VIII's bull *Unam Sanctam*: 'We declare, announce, define and proclaim that subjection to

the Roman Pontiff is absolutely necessary for salvation for every human being' (Denz 469). As Lash has written, 'There, surely, is an *ex cathedra* papal definition if ever there was one, and it seems to be manifestly false.'²² But Lash, following Gellner, shows how a theologian feels he has to proceed here. He will put the statement into its context. This context, he will say, was the conflict between the respective socio-political authority of the Pope and the King of France. Boniface was affirming the transcendence of God's kingdom, in relation to which all human community is provisional and subordinate. Understood in this way, the theologian will take the statement as meaningful and true. But, as Lash points out, it was his prior attitude towards papal authority that led the theologian to take all that context into account. Someone without that conviction to safeguard would have been prepared to take the statement at its face value and to say that, however understandable in its time, as a theological proposition it is patently false.

This example sheds some light on Brown's interpretation of the traditional doctrines listed above. Surely the same dynamic is operating. Brown's interpretations are obviously dependent on his prior conviction about the authoritative nature of the statements in question, and are geared to preserve that conviction. Such a conviction, though natural and proper for most of the history of Christianity, now seems like part of the general culture of earlier times. In an age which has ceased automatically to seek its norms in the past, it appears far less natural. Interpretations devised to safeguard authoritative statements from the past now seem rather transparent, contrived and unnecessary.

Continuity

For most of Christian history, change did not present a serious problem to faith, but when it began to, over a century ago, the natural way to cope with change was to speak in terms of continuity, to see the new conditions, and to explain it in terms of a gentle inevitable development of one form into another. But we now seem to be entering another phase. The dynamic or evolutionary conceptions of history which in the 19th century replaced static ways of experiencing reality are themselves giving way to a more episodic understanding of history that takes particular cultures more seriously and gives far greater emphasis to historical and cultural discontinuity. Otherness, rather than organic growth, is becoming a more natural interpretative category. The model of development seems no longer so compelling. In Lash's words: 'Whereas theories of doctrinal development or evolution were an appropriate theological expression of the historical consciousness of the period that is now coming to an end, they have become—in our own day—increasingly unsatisfactory as conceptualisations of historical understanding.'²³

All Christians, when they think of particular phenomena in the

history of Christianity once very important and now not (the veneration of relics, for example), see how different contemporary Christianity is. But more and more are spontaneously struck by the *otherness* of practices of this kind, not by any impression of a natural and smooth progression whereby those practices become modern Christianity. One theologian who exemplifies this more recent approach is the Anglican, Leslie Houlden. He does not operate with any paradigm of development. He talks of today's Christians standing not on the shoulders of our Christian forebears as in some gymnastic pyramid, but at a different point on the circumference of a circle, looking inwards at that from which all derive²⁴.

Brown and Dummett still find it easy to talk in terms of development. Trajectory, too, is a natural image for Brown. The more recent sensibility, however, finds these images awkward, artificial and unhelpful. For those who share this sensibility, an approach giving a higher priority to strangeness and otherness would seem more plausible and convincing.

In the light of this, I would suggest that an approach like Brown's is based on at least some assumptions that are no longer very compelling. Brown himself is aware of the hazards of failing to move when all others have moved; in his study of the Johannine community he notes that the original christological and eucharistic heresies of the Jewish Christians stemmed from their remaining fixed when 'the main body of Christians had moved on'²⁵. A large part of the western intellectual community has 'moved on' to a consciousness profoundly different from that which characterised those who formulated many of Christianity's key questions.

Biblical critics are almost by definition in this group. For most of them it no longer comes naturally to think in terms of a normative past, authoritative texts, and development—not, at least, in the uncomplicated way Christians used to. They would not instinctively describe Christianity as a 'faith once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3), but they would easily see the possibilities in, say, Sykes' presentation of Christianity as an 'essentially contested concept'²⁶. When confronted with a bewildered modern Christian lamenting that biblical scholars are expressing views different from traditional belief, they would not reply, 'Don't worry, the changes are slight and bear only on inessentials'; they would more readily reply, 'Don't worry, the changes are substantial but inevitable, because changes in consciousness are a necessary part of human experience'.

1 Michael Dummett: 'A Remarkable Consensus', *New Blackfriars* (Vol 68, no. 809, Oct 1987), 424–431; 'Unsafe Premises: A reply to Nicholas Lash', *New Blackfriars* (Vol 68, no. 811, Dec 1987), 558–566.

2 Thomas Sheehan, 'Revolution in the Church', *New York Review of Books* (14 June 1984), 35–39.

3 Nicholas Lash, 'A Leaky Sort of Thing? The divisiveness of Michael Dummett',

- New Blackfriars* (Vol 68, no. 811, Dec 1987), 554.
- 4 Timothy Radcliffe OP, 'Interrogating the Consensus: a response to Michael Dummett', *New Blackfriars* (Vol 69, no. 814, March 1987), 116f., quoting from a letter from Raymond Brown in *The Tablet* 5 March 1988, 272f. that commented on a report of this debate in *The Tablet* 9 Jan 1988, 34.
- 5 Raymond E. Brown, 'Liberals, Ultraconservatives, and the Misinterpretation of Catholic Biblical Exegesis', *Cross Currents* (Fall 1984), 318.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 315.
- 7 R.E. Brown, *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine* (NY, Paulist Press, 1985), 48.
- 8 R.E. Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (NY, Paulist Press, 1981), 86–7.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 10 *Biblical Exegesis*, 17. Brown also deals with this idea of 'nuance' in *ibid.*, 29, 46, 57, 60–61, 143 fn. 135.
- 11 *ibid.*, 65.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 13 *Critical Meaning*, 89.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 18, fn. 41.
- 15 Robert L. Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings* (London, SCM, 1979), 43.
- 16 *Prescription Against Heretics*, 35; see Wilken, *The Myth*, 48.
- 17 See Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge, CUP, 1957), 17.
- 18 See T.M. Schoof, *A Survey of Catholic Theology 1800–1900* (NY, Paulist Press, 1970), 163.
- 19 See Gabriel Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integrity* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980), 15–17.
- 20 See Wilken, *The Myth*, 25.
- 21 For an admirable treatment of this whole question, see John Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile*, London, DLT, 1986.
- 22 Nicholas Lash, *Change in Focus: A Study of Doctrinal Change and Continuity* (London, Sheed & Ward, 1973), 174–175.
- 23 *Ibid.*, IX.
- 24 J.L. Houlden, *Patterns of Faith: A Study in the Relationship between the New Testament and Christian Doctrine* (London, SCM, 1977), 15.
- 25 Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1979), 80.
- 26 Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity* (London, SPCK, 1984), 251ff., 262, 282.

Editor: This debate initiated by Professor Dummett has now run for nine months. We are planning to close it in the autumn, but precisely when will depend on whether new contributions we receive carry the debate significantly further. We thank all the readers who have written to us so far, and regret that we have only been able to print a small selection of their contributions.