

ST. THOMAS AND DR. WICKSTEED

IN the last two numbers of BLACKFRIARS we have been considering the use that St. Thomas makes of the New Testament in the *Summa contra Gentiles*—that is, when defending the Christian Faith against unbelievers. Since writing those articles we have read, for the first time, a lecture in which the late Dr. Wicksteed deals with the same subject. The work of which the lecture forms a part¹ has been highly praised in Catholic, as well as in non-Catholic, reviews for its presentation of St. Thomas's doctrine. We wish to pass no judgment on the book as a whole, but concerning this particular lecture we think that there can be no doubt that it utterly fails to do justice to St. Thomas's thought. As the point is an important one, and Dr. Wicksteed's account is likely to be taken as satisfactory, we propose to attempt to justify our criticism of him. In doing so we may perhaps supply some of the deficiencies in our previous treatment of the question.

The first and second of Dr. Wicksteed's lectures are entitled 'The Task of Aquinas' and 'The goal postulated by human nature.' The third, the one we are concerned with, is entitled 'Scripture the authoritative guide.' It opens with a reminder to the reader that the second lecture had investigated 'the elaborate *a priori* demonstration, given by Aquinas in the *Contra Gentiles*, of the necessity for a supernatural revelation.' After a few other remarks Dr. Wicksteed continues :

The keystone of the arch, however, has still to be placed. Granted that in the nature of things we are en-

¹ *The Reactions between Dogma and Philosophy illustrated from the works of St. Thomas Aquinas* by Philip H. Wicksteed, M.A., Litt.D. The book contains the Hibbert Lectures for 1916. It was first published in 1920, and was re-issued in 1926 (London : Constable & Co.).

St. Thomas and Dr. Wicksteed

titled to expect a revelation, and that we know the conditions with which it must comply, on what evidence are we called upon to accept the Christian scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as being, or as containing, that revelation?

The principal passage in which Aquinas recognises the necessity of expressly answering this question is to be found in the *Contra Gentiles*. This treatise was composed at the special request of Raymund Pinnaforte (celebrated as the collector of the Decretals), who was then the Master-General of the Dominicans, for the support of the missionaries who were attempting the conversion of Saracens and others. In his great theological text-books and monographs Thomas was able to assume the authority of the Scriptures as axiomatic, because 'no science has to prove its own principles.' The 'principles' of other sciences, if not self-evident, are received by them from 'first philosophy' or metaphysics. The principles of theology are received originally from Christ himself, that is to say, from God, by the inspired writers, including especially the Apostles, who saw and heard the Word made flesh. Secondarily, they are handed down from these inspired writers to us. This is the accepted basis upon which the Christian teacher, addressing Christian students, is to rear his systematic instruction.

But now that St. Thomas is equipping his readers to deal with Saracens and Moors who do not accept any portion of the Christian scriptures—to say nothing of the Jews who reject the most important part of them—it is obviously necessary to show the rational basis on which our faith in the Scriptures rests, for there is no other ground of appeal.

Here, then, is the argument. The necessity of revelation having been demonstrated, we are to show that the Christian scriptures, which claim to be such a revelation, comply with the required conditions, and can establish their claim to be considerably accepted as true. The Christian believer is not a light-hearted follower of 'cunningly devised fables,' but can give a reason for the faith that is in him.

The momentous chapter (book i, chap. 6), in which this keystone of the arch is set in position, deserves to be summarised in its entirety.

Blackfriars

A summary of the chapter then follows. No summary could be altogether adequate, for the chapter is itself a summary, and a summary of wonderful conciseness and precision. But even so Dr. Wicksteed's summary is far more unsatisfactory than it need have been. But it is rather with his comments on the chapter that we are concerned. Having given his summary, he proceeds :

No one, I think, can read this chapter of the *Contra Gentiles* or the paraphrase of it in the twenty-fourth canto of the *Paradiso* without being moved. But as an argument, it is only impressive in its own context and environment. To the modern mind, so far as it can entertain the question of the occurrence of miracles at all, the relation between them and the authority of the teaching with which they are associated in the Bible is completely reversed. The historical credibility of the scriptural miracles is now hardly defended except on the credit of the teaching with which they are associated. The miracles, so far from being a support to the truth of the Gospel, are only a weight that it has to carry (pp. 160-164).

It would take too long to attempt to point out and correct all the misconceptions and inaccuracies to be found in the passages we have quoted. We shall note only those which more directly bear upon the subject of our previous articles, and shall deal at greater length with the flaccid nonsense—we hope the reader will in the end agree with this description—contained in the passage last quoted.

The first thing to note—and it is not mere captiousness to note it, as will appear later—is that it is not correct to say, as Dr. Wicksteed does, that St. Thomas's purpose in the sixth chapter of his first book is to show that the Christian scriptures are a true revelation. If the reader cares to read the chapter in question he will see that there is not a single mention in it of the Christian scriptures as being, or containing, a revelation. There are just three pas-

St. Thomas and Dr. Wicksteed

sages in which the Bible is mentioned, and for the purpose which those passages have in view it is sufficient to take it as a collection of documents which are known to have been in existence before a certain date, and may be consulted like any other documents. Halfway through the chapter St. Thomas wishes to make the point that the wonderful events which occurred at the rise of the Christian religion were not mere chance happenings, but were due to divine ordering; he gives as his proof the fact that such events had been foretold long before by men claiming to speak in God's name, 'whose books are held in veneration amongst us as bearing witness to our faith.' His very phrasing shows that he is arguing from the simple historical fact that long before the Christian era (as pre-Christian books show in which they were recorded), predictions were made which were fulfilled in the Christian religion. The second mention occurs when the Saint remarks that the line of argument he is pursuing is alluded to in *Hebrews* ii, 3, 4. The third, when, in proof that Mahomet received no revelation from God, the Saint points out that he borrowed from the Old and New Testaments—and corrupted what he borrowed; in other words, the argument rests on the simple comparison of the Koran with writings admittedly far earlier in date.

What, then, is the purpose of the chapter in question? The heading runs thus: 'That, although the truths of faith are above reason, to assent to them does not show light-mindedness' (*assentire . . . non est levitatis*). This is repeated in the opening sentence: 'Though these truths are beyond the province of human reason, those who accept them as true do not believe lightly, as though following silly fables (*II Peter*, i, 16).' Supernatural truths can be known only by revelation, and in order not to believe lightly

Blackfriars

it is necessary to have sufficiently weighty evidence that they have been revealed. St. Thomas, therefore, proceeds: 'For these truths, known only to the Divine Wisdom, the Divine Wisdom Himself, who knows all things most perfectly, deigned to reveal to men' and then follows the evidence for the fact of a revelation.

Several times already we have alluded to the resemblances between this sixth chapter of the *Contra Gentiles* and the final section, on 'Revealed Religion,' of Newman's *Grammar of Assent*. The parallels are so striking and so illuminating that we propose to set them before the reader as occasion arises.

'Those who accept these truths do not believe lightly,' *i.e.*, they have sufficiently weighty evidence for the existence of a revelation. The Saint's manner of expressing himself is worthy of note. By beginning in this concrete way he seems to suggest that the evidence for a revelation should be estimated, not in the abstract, but according to the weight it will have in certain individual living minds. In other words, he supposes minds in a certain state of preparation. Three books out of the four in the *Summa contra Gentiles* are there to remind us that supernatural truths presuppose the truths of Natural Religion. But that is not precisely the point here. When arguing for the existence of a Revelation, St. Thomas presupposes, not merely that those natural truths are truths, but that they inform the mind that is to consider the evidence. 'Instead of saying,' remarks Newman,² 'that the truths of Revelation depend on those of Natural Religion, it is more pertinent to say that belief in revealed truths depends on belief in natural. Belief is a state of mind; belief generates belief; states of mind correspond to each other'

² *Grammar of Assent*, p. 408 (all quotations are taken from the first edition of 1870).

St. Thomas and Dr. Wicksteed

What are the truths that a mind should be possessed of when it approaches the evidence for the existence of a Revelation? St. Thomas would certainly have endorsed what Newman says on the point :

I have no scruple in beginning the review I shall take of Christianity by professing to consult for those only whose minds are properly prepared for it; and by being prepared, I mean to denote those who are imbued with the religious opinions and sentiments which I have identified with Natural Religion. . . .

Starting from these elements, we may determine without difficulty the class of sentiments, intellectual and moral, which constitute the formal preparation for entering upon what are called the Evidences of Christianity. These Evidences, then, presuppose a belief and perception of the Divine Presence, a recognition of His attributes and an admiration of His Person viewed under them, a conviction of the worth of the soul and of the reality and momentousness of the unseen world . . . a desire to know and to love Him, and a sensitive looking-out in all that happens, whether in the course of nature or of human life, for tokens, if such there be, of His bestowing on us what we so greatly need. These are specimens of the state of mind for which I stipulate in those who would inquire into the truth of Christianity.³

That St. Thomas took for granted the same state of mind is manifest if the first three books of the *Contra Gentiles* are read in the spirit in which they were written. He presupposes that of the truths of Natural Religion there explained the mind that enters upon the question of supernatural truths has a living apprehension.

There is one principle which Newman dwells on incessantly, which indeed he calls momentous (p. 407)—namely, the recognition of the providence of God, or, as he puts it in the passage quoted above, ‘a belief and perception of the Divine Presence, a sensitive looking-out in all that happens for tokens of His

³ *Op. cit.* pp. 410-413.

Blackfriars

bestowing on us what we so greatly need.' In his University Sermons of thirty or forty years before he recurs again and again to the same point. To quote but one passage: 'They who have not that instinctive apprehension of the Omnipresence of God and His unwearied and minute Providence which holiness and love create within us, must not be surprised to find that the evidence of Christianity does not perform an office which was never intended for it—*viz.*, that of recommending itself as well as the Revelation.'⁴ With this we should compare the way in which St. Thomas sets about his argument. After laying down his thesis that Christians 'do not believe lightly, for those truths, known only to the Divine Wisdom, the same Divine Wisdom, who knows all things most perfectly, deigned to reveal to men,' the Saint begins the proof of this revelation with the words: 'He (*i.e.*, the Divine Wisdom) showed His Presence and the truth of the teaching and of the inspiration by suitable signs,'⁵ and he then proceeds to set out the signs in question.

The word we have translated by 'signs' is, in the Latin, 'argumenta.' An 'argumentum' is a sensible fact which is a sure sign or token of some other fact (*cf. Summa Theol.* III, lv, 5 and 6, on the proofs of Our Lord's resurrection). It is not, then, a question of, say, mathematical reasoning, but of the patient assimilation and appreciation of facts, indeed in a sense—as we shall see—of one single enormous

⁴ *Oxford University Sermons*, p. 214 (3rd ed., 1872).

⁵ This important sentence dominates the rest of the chapter. It is entirely omitted in Dr. Wicksteed's summary. What is more remarkable is that it suffers the same fate in Fr. Rickaby's translation. This is not the only occasion on which the latter cannot find room for a sentence—and a short one at that—which is of particular importance and expressed with special care. We gave an instance in an earlier article, and a casual examination some time ago revealed several others.

St. Thomas and Dr. Wicksteed

fact. Duly assimilated and appreciated, these facts may be a sure sign of something else, but only when they are duly assimilated and appreciated, and for this a certain preparation of mind is required. 'I do but say,' remarks Newman—and the antecedent probability he speaks of covers the state of mind we found him stipulating for before—'I do but say that it is antecedent probability that gives meaning to those arguments from facts which are commonly called the Evidences of Revelation; that, whereas mere probability proves nothing, mere facts persuade no one; that probability is to fact, as the soul to the body.'⁶

These facts are signs, and suitable signs, of the Presence of the Divine Wisdom. (The Latin word 'praesentia' is stronger than our word 'presence.' It denotes a presence that is efficacious, a governing hand.) To be suitable they should be perceptible in some way to the senses; the Divine Wisdom might infuse supernatural truths into certain minds, but the fact would remain secret and beyond the knowledge of other minds unless some outward sign were given. To be sure signs they must be in some way supernatural; no merely natural event, no event, that is, which requires no more than the God of nature, would serve as a confirmation of the fact of a supernaturally revealing God.

It is the Presence of the Divine Wisdom that has to be signified, that is, of One Who 'reacheth from end to end mightily and ordereth all things sweetly' (*Wisdom*, viii, 1). We presuppose that from end to end, in time and space, the world is completely His, that its meaning and direction will be one, and that the facts by which He shows Himself to be supernaturally present, will coalesce to form one argument. We may use here some words of Bishop Butler,

⁶ *University Sermons*, p. 200.

Blackfriars

though he had not in view altogether the same point as we are making :

In the evidence of Christianity there seem to be several things of great weight, not reducible to the head, either of miracles or the completion of prophecy, in the common acceptation of the words. But these two are its direct and fundamental proofs : and those other things, however considerable they are, yet ought never to be urged apart from its direct proofs, but always to be joined with them. Thus the evidence of Christianity will be a long series of things, reaching, as it seems, from the beginning of the world to the present time, of great variety and compass, taking in both the direct, and also the collateral, proofs ; and making up, all of them together, one argument ; the conviction arising from which kind of proof may be compared to what they call *the effect* in architecture or other works of art ; a result from a great number of things so and so disposed, and taken into one view.⁷

Such an argument is peculiarly adapted for showing the Presence of a Divine Wisdom reaching from end to end and ordering all things sweetly.

The facts, then, must be united into one view. Even the most superficial reader cannot but notice how carefully St. Thomas links them together, with the Presence of the Divine Wisdom dominating them all. We have not the space to give the passage, but it is not necessary for our purpose, which is to justify our criticism of Dr. Wicksteed's account of it. To the latter, therefore, we now return.

A glance at the last passage quoted from Dr. Wicksteed will show that he has taken into consideration only what might be called miracles in the strictest sense of the word, such supernatural works, that is, as raising the dead to life, and healing of diseases. After mentioning the modern mind he goes on : ' The historical credibility of the scriptural miracles is now hardly defended except on the credit of the teaching

⁷ *Analogy of Religion*, Part ii, chap. 7.

St. Thomas and Dr. Wicksteed

with which they are associated. The miracles, so far from being a support to the truth of the Gospel, are only a weight that it has to carry.'

Among other things, then, Dr. Wicksteed entirely neglects St. Thomas's proof from prophecy. Now even the 'modern mind' cannot rule out *a priori* this proof from prophecy. There are facts involved which must be considered. The predictions of the prophets may or may not have been fulfilled in Christianity, but at least they were made, and there is at any rate enough evidence of their having been fulfilled in Christianity for—if we may so say—the grand jury to return a true bill. 'That the Jewish Scriptures,' says Newman,⁸ 'were in existence long before the Christian era, and were in the sole custody of the Jews, is undeniable; whatever, then, their Scriptures distinctly say of Christianity, if not attributable to chance or to happy conjecture, is prophetic.' And after giving a brief outline of what was prophesied, he continues: 'This is the great outline of the prediction, and if we are able to prove nothing else, to prove as much as this is far from unimportant. And it is undeniable, I say, both that the Jewish Scriptures contain thus much, and that the Jews actually understood them as containing it.' The proof from prophecy, then, ignored by Dr. Wicksteed, at least starts from facts which not even the 'modern mind' can deny.

But, what is more important still, Dr. Wicksteed entirely neglects, too, what St. Thomas considers *the greatest miracle of all*. We must give it in St. Thomas's own words:

Through no compulsion of arms, through no promise of pleasure, nay, what is most wonderful, in spite of the tyranny of persecutors, a countless crowd, not only of simple folk, but of the wisest as well, flocked to the

⁸ *Grammar of Assent*, p. 435.

Blackfriars

Christian Faith, a religion, that is, in which are preached things above the grasp of the human mind, restraint is put on the pleasures of the flesh, and contempt is taught for the things of this world. That the minds of mortal men should accept such teaching and should despise the things that are seen and fix their desire solely on things unseen, is the greatest of miracles and manifestly the work of divine inspiration.

‘Haec tam mirabilis mundi conversio,’ as he calls it, was ever regarded by St. Thomas as the supreme miracle. Thus, in a later work (*Summa Theol.* III, xlii, 1 ad 2), he says: ‘The divine power in Christ was shown with most force (*maxime*) in this, that He conferred on His disciples such great power in teaching that they won for Him nations who (unlike the Jews) had never heard of the Christ.’

Now the point is this, that, however much the ‘modern mind’ may reject ‘the historical credibility of the scriptural miracles,’ not even the most modern of modern minds can reject the fact of this conversion. Yet Dr. Wicksteed, in his criticism of St. Thomas’s argument, neglects it entirely. And, in doing so, he turns his back on the history of the world.

It is not without interest to note that these two facts, ignored by Dr. Wicksteed, are just the two proofs that Newman insists on so strongly in the *Grammar of Assent*. And he does so for a reason which we have already mentioned—namely, that, unlike miracles in the strictest sense, they are not of a kind to be denied as facts. He writes:*

All professed revelations have been attended, in one shape or another, with the profession of miracles; and we know how direct and unequivocal are the miracles of both the Jewish covenant and of our own. However, my object here is to assume as little as possible as regards

* *Op. cit.*, p. 422.

St. Thomas and Dr. Wicksteed

facts, and to dwell only on what is patent and notorious; and therefore I will only insist on those coincidences and their cumulations, which, though not in themselves miraculous, do irresistibly force upon us, almost by the law of our nature, the presence of the extraordinary agency of Him whose being we already acknowledge. Though coincidences rise out of a combination of general laws, there is no law of those coincidences; they have a character of their own, and seem left by Providence in His own hands, as the channel by which, inscrutable to us, He may make known to us His will.

And two pages later he explains :

I do not mean, of course, to imply that those circumstances, when traced back to their first origins, are not the outcome of miraculous intervention, but that the miraculous intervention addresses us at this day in the guise of those circumstances; that is, of coincidences, which are indications, to the illative sense of those who believe in a God, of His immediate Presence.

We have already said something of Newman's argument from prophecy. The argument from the second fact, 'haec tam mirabilis mundi conversio,' furnishes some of his most moving pages. We have room for one quotation only. After insisting on the *fact* of the conversion, and its taking place, not through force, but through the *preaching of Christ's disciples*, he says (p. 459):

Now all this, perhaps, will be called cloudy, mystical, unintelligible; that is, in other words, miraculous. I think it is so. How, without the Hand of God, could a new idea, one and the same, enter at once into myriads of men, women, and children of all ranks, especially the lower, and have power to wean them from their indulgences and sins, and to nerve them against the most cruel tortures, and to last in vigour as a sustaining influence for seven or eight generations, till it founded an extended polity, broke the obstinacy of the strongest and wisest government which the world has ever seen, and forced its way from its first caves and catacombs to the fulness of imperial power?

Blackfriars

‘As an argument,’ says Dr. Wicksteed, speaking of St. Thomas’s whole argument, ‘it is only impressive in its own context and environment.’ He means, I suppose, that it might impress the medieval, but not the modern mind. As we remarked above, in saying this Dr. Wicksteed simply turns his back on the real world. This conversion of the world is a fact, indeed so undeniable a fact that St. Thomas uses it as evidence of the credibility of miracles strictly so called.

Such a wonderful conversion of the world to the Christian Faith is the most certain proof that those miracles did take place, so much so that there is no need for them to be repeated further, since they are to be seen quite clearly in their *effect*. For it would be the most wonderful of all signs, if without those wonderful signs the world had been brought by simple and low-born men to believe things so difficult, to do things so irksome, and to put their hope in things so far above them.

Does Dr. Wicksteed show the slightest sign of having tried to enter into this argument? Newman’s statement of it against Hume shall be our last quotation from him :

A priori, of course, the acts of men are not so trustworthy as the order of nature, and the pretence of miracles is in fact more common than the occurrence. But the question is not about miracles in general, or men in general, but definitely, whether these particular miracles, ascribed to the particular Peter, James, and John, are more likely to have been or not; whether they are unlikely, supposing that there is a Power, external to the world, who can bring them about; supposing they are the only means by which He can reveal Himself to those who need a revelation; supposing He is likely to reveal Himself; that He has a great end in doing so; that the professed miracles in question are like His natural works, and such as He is likely to work, in case He wrought miracles; *that great effects, otherwise unaccountable, in the event followed upon the acts said to be miraculous; that they were from the first accepted as true by large*

St. Thomas and Dr. Wicksteed

*numbers of men against their natural interests; that the reception of them as true has left its mark upon the world, as no other event ever did; that, viewed in their effects, they have—that is, the belief of them has—served to raise human nature to a high moral standard, otherwise unattainable: these and the like considerations are parts of a great complex argument, which so far can be put into propositions, but which, between, and around, and behind these, is implicit and secret, and cannot by any ingenuity be imprisoned in a formula, and packed into a nutshell. These various conditions may be decided in the affirmative or in the negative. That is a further point; here I only insist upon the nature of the argument, if it is to be philosophical. It must be no smart antithesis which may look well on paper; but the living action of the mind on a great problem of fact; and we must summon to our aid all our powers and resources, if we would encounter it worthily, and not as if it were a literary essay.*¹⁰

So with Dr. Wicksteed. We complain, not that he has considered and decided in the negative, but that he has not considered at all. No trace of the living action of the mind, no summoning to his aid of all his powers and resources to encounter worthily a great argument presented by a master mind—nothing but the dragging in of the bogie called the modern mind. It is simply the refusal of reason to deal with the world as it exists.

We must say a brief word in conclusion on a matter with which we began. We said that it was not correct to say, as Dr. Wicksteed does, that St. Thomas's purpose in the chapter criticised was to show that the Christian scriptures were, or contained, a revelation. The point is not unimportant, since on his misconception Dr. Wicksteed bases the following charge against St. Thomas :

But our present concern is not with the weakness of the argument, but with the narrowness of the foundation which it lays in comparison with the amplitude of the

¹⁰ *Grammar of Assent*, pp. 299-300 (italics ours).

Blackfriars

erection which it is called upon to support. For the modern reader, accustomed to think of the mediæval Church in terms of the polemics of the Reformation, will not be slow to note that what we have here is a defence of the scripturalistic as against the ecclesiastical theory of the ultimate authority in matters of faith. In proving, to his own satisfaction, the conclusive and unique authority of the Scripture, Aquinas has furnished after generations of Protestants with all they want. But has he provided himself with all he wants? Emphatically not (p. 164).

‘The scripturalistic as against the ecclesiastical theory of the ultimate authority in matters of faith,’ ‘the conclusive and unique authority of Scripture’—there is not a single word about such matters. What St. Thomas is proving is *the truth of what was taught by the first preachers of the Christian Faith*. And as he was aware, ‘the excellence of Christ’s teaching cannot be comprised in any book’ and ‘the disciples taught by word of mouth as well as in writing’ (*Summa Theol.* III, xlii, 4).

LUKE WALKER, O.P.