

# What Chance for Ecumenism?

Michael Dummett

*Editor: It was Professor Michael Dummett who, fourteen months ago, with his controversial article 'A Remarkable Consensus', started the sharpest debate that has run in our pages for many years, and we are here affording Professor Dummett the final word. However, although we are now closing this debate, many of the same issues will be touched on again (if from rather a different angle) in the special issue which we will be publishing in February, 'What Counts as Catholic Teaching?'. Rowan Williams, Nicholas Lash, Edmund Hill OP, Timothy Radcliffe OP and Paul Parvis OP will be contributing to this. Later in the year Dominican Conferences will be mounting a conference based on it.*

From the discussion in the pages of *New Blackfriars* that has followed on my article of October 1987, 'A Remarkable Consensus', I have learned much. Half of my article was devoted to the prospects of reunion with the Orthodox; and from the fact that none of the commentators has so much as mentioned that half, I conclude that anxiety for such reunion is not acute among the British Catholic intelligentsia. I think this attitude to it is mistaken: it is among our most urgent needs. Since the schism, the Catholic Church has been, intellectually and spiritually, a crippled body, paralysed, as it were, down the whole of one side: we need once more to become one with Eastern Christians for the sake of our own health, at least as much as for their advantage.

At first I was puzzled by the vehemence of the reaction to the other half of my article: why were so many people so very cross with me? I think I now understand that, and have learned that, in fastening on the rejection, by Professor Sheehan, of various items of the Creed, I picked the wrong target, at least as far as Britain is concerned; probably there is a notable difference in this respect from the United States. Several of those who have replied to me have indicated that they personally believe the same about the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection as I do: what annoys them is the *ground* I gave for my belief. Mr. Fitzpatrick put his finger on the point when he said in his article that 'Dummett's is yet another Roman Catholic attempt to make ecclesiology ... the foundation on which theological argument rests' (March 1988, p. 136). The point comes over very clearly in a C.T.S. pamphlet on *The Virgin Birth* by

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Bishop Alan Clark. In it, he defends a wholly traditional view of the matter; but his argument is based entirely on reasoning about how Saints Matthew and Luke intended their readers to understand them. To explain his adoption of this approach, Bishop Clark says, 'it is doubtful whether an appeal to the traditional teaching of the Church is the right instrument with which to confront the implications of today's hesitancy'. It is not the right instrument because those who hesitate will remain unconvinced by it: they do not go in for believing things because they have long been taught by the Church. But that was the reason I gave for believing them, backed by some argument about the rationale for belonging to the Catholic Church; and what infuriates my commentators is that anyone should any longer offer such a reason. The enlightened among us have given all that up; it is obscurantism to try to revive it. If the price of keeping it at bay is to deny that there is any rationale for belonging to the Catholic Church, then, apparently, it is better to pay it; at any rate, none of the commentators offered any alternative rationale.

What we are supposed to do, instead of relying on the teaching of the Church, is to make our own investigations on such matters as what the New Testament writers intended, and from them arrive at our own conclusions. Of course, most of us are ill-equipped to carry out such researches: it is a highly technical matter, to be investigated by experts. That is why we hear so much about experts in some of the contributions, those, for instance, of Professor Lash (in December 1987) and Mr Fitzpatrick. To enquire into even the smallest point, one must master a vast and complex literature: and even then, according to Mr. Fitzpatrick (p. 130), it will be no good unless one has qualified by an authentic conversion (by whom authenticated we are not told). So the ordinary Catholic must simply believe what he is told by the experts, or at least the authentically converted experts: they, and not Councils or Popes, will hand down the required interpretations of Christian belief.

This might be called scientific Protestantism: and the fallacy underlying it is that it removes all ground for belief. Even were I an expert, I doubt whether I could feel at all certain of conclusions about what the New Testament writers intended, formed only according to the ordinary canons of textual criticism. But, even if I were, what Hume wrote about miracles would surely then apply to the Virgin Birth, and probably also to the Resurrection. Even if we had the firmest grounds for thinking that the Evangelists meant us to suppose these events to have occurred, and that they themselves believed that they had, would it not be more probable that they had made one mistake or another than that such things had really happened?

As a schoolboy, long before any thought of becoming a Christian had crossed my mind, I was deeply impressed when one of my teachers came into class and said, 'I did not invent the Christian religion'. Mr.

Fitzpatrick's authentically converted theologians, who scorn to accept anything as authoritative save as interpreted through their own insight or inner light, are engaged in re-inventing the Christian religion: and most of the contributors propose that each of us should re-invent it, or that we should allow the experts to do so. But nothing so invented could possibly be the Christian religion. 'The Western intellectual tradition has ceased to be orientated or fixed on the past', Dr. Paul Gifford tells us (July/August, p. 335). Well, indeed it has; it has also become hostile to Christianity, and even to belief in God. We marvel, now, at the assumption, natural to men of the Renaissance, that the ancients were wiser than their successors, and that therefore all ancient writing is authoritative just by reason of its antiquity; but respect for the tradition of Christian belief is not just an instance of this assumption. Dr. Gifford promises us 'strangeness and otherness' in progressive Catholic religion (p. 338); but if there is nothing in our faith that may not be replaced by something strange and other, then we have no ground now for believing any part of it that goes beyond natural theology, and shall have no ground for believing the strange and other doctrines being, or yet to be, introduced. If, on the other hand, the Catholic faith has irreplaceable components, it is important to try to draw the line between them and what it is open to us to discard.

The Christian faith purports to come from God, and contains many elements that could, at best, be wild speculation if they were held to derive from the thinking of men, however holy their lives or keen their insight. Our recognition of that claim rests on faith in Christ: and I already argued that, unless he claimed to be divine, our ascription of divinity to him must be both blasphemous and groundless. Given the Incarnation, it is not unreasonable to trust his teaching as true teaching, or to credit God with having provided the means for safeguarding that teaching from corruption. To do this, you do not need to have a theory about the relation in Christ between human and divine knowledge; but if you have a theory that so greatly stresses the fallibility of his human knowledge that there is no longer much reason to believe what he said, then you have undermined the Christian faith. The same applies if the most solemn pronouncements of the Church are treated as no longer deserving of credence. It is of no use to think it all through afresh and come to the same conclusion, for no such conclusion will be of much value: if the Holy Spirit does not speak through the Church, you can hardly feel assured that the Holy Spirit will speak through you. As I strove to insist, we have to acknowledge that the Church, as a human institution, has been very fallible indeed, and frequently betrayed her master. This makes it urgent to delineate just where and how the Church can go wrong in her actions, and in her teaching, too. But chiefly so that we can have a clearer grasp of where the Church can *not* go wrong: if you

have the idea that nothing the Church teaches or has ever taught has any particular claim on us, you will undercut the ground of belief in many ingredients of the Christian faith which, judged only on the basis of what we find in the ancient writings, might mean any one of a number of different things.

We have, of course, to distinguish between facts and formulations. Mary's virginal conception of Jesus, if it happened, is a fact, as is the empty tomb (empty not at the hands of grave-robbers). The statements in the creeds of the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity are formulations. Christians have held themselves bound to accept both the Church's attestations of facts, as being of faith, and her formulations of doctrines; but the two are very different. To the facts she had only to hold firm: but she had to struggle, or be guided, towards the formulations. The facts admit of no development, but are simply facts; the formulations were the outcome of development, and may admit of further development, as long as it is faithful to that which has already occurred. But a formulation is always a formulation *of* something: it embodies a sharper and more explicit understanding of what was already believed. We have, therefore, also to distinguish the formulation from the tenet it formulates: the tenet was held before the formulation was attained. There seems to me to have been, in some of the contributions, a surprising confusion about this distinction. In my original article, I said that, if Jesus knew nothing of the Trinity, we have no warrant for supposing that there is a Trinity (Oct. 1987, p. 430). Professor Lash replied that 'it is quite unnecessary to suppose that Jesus had to hand ... an Aramaic concept which would conveniently render into Greek as *homoousios*' (Dec. 1987, p.556), and Mr. Fitzpatrick said that 'to ascribe Trinitarian belief to Jesus is anachronistic since the term "Trinity" and the notions of substance, consubstantial and person with which it is historically associated are patently post-biblical' (p. 136). These remarks appear to me to incorporate a thoroughgoing confusion of formulation with tenet, indeed of words with concepts (there is no such thing as an Aramaic concept). They imply that Christians before Nicaea, baptising in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, could not properly be said to have believed in the Trinity; and the claim seems to me preposterous. Jesus said (perhaps I ought to say, 'is represented as having said'), 'I and the Father are one', and he also prayed to his Father. That seems to me very good ground for saying that he conceived of the Father as a person distinct from himself, with whom he was nevertheless united. For any individual with a normal mastery of language, to address someone as 'you' is to recognise him as a person distinct from oneself: no learned remarks about Greek words like *prosopon* and *hypostasis* can obscure this.

I am less inclined to press the matter of reunion with the Orthodox

than I was. They have retained the sense which, until recently, we had, that it is our task to preserve the truth that was long ago given to us; until we recapture that sense, reunion is impossible. No doubt, it is only the intelligentsia that has lost it: unfortunately, the intelligentsia cannot be disregarded.

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Mr. Fitzpatrick, in his 'Response' to my 'Theology and Reason' (June, pp. 295—67), makes of our disagreement a very personal matter. I will confine myself to issues of principle.

A fundamental confusion underlies all that Mr. Fitzpatrick writes about deductive reasoning, and vitiates his entire epistemology: that, namely, between a *means* of arriving at the truth and a *ground* for accepting it. A certain style of thinking, for example by making imaginative leaps, or by drawing analogies, may well be conducive to arriving at the solution to a problem; when the problem is a mathematical one, such techniques are brilliantly explained in Polya's celebrated *How to Solve It*. But, having found the solution, one's use of those techniques is no substitute for proof, save in so far as they indicate how to give rational grounds for believing the solution to be correct. Likewise, there may be preparations for an intellectual enquiry that make an invaluable contribution to the probability of its success: fasting for seven weeks, praying for forty hours without ceasing, reading the Bible, reading Plato, or experiencing a religious conversion might, in different cases, fall under this head. But none of these things is a substitute for a ground that can be offered to others as a reason for believing that one has arrived at the truth. The individual concerned might conceivably say to himself, 'I have undergone an authentic conversion (fasted for seven weeks, or whatever), and therefore my conclusions must be correct'; but others are unlikely to regard this as a reason for accepting what he says, and, if they do, they will be treating him as an authority in just the way Mr. Fitzpatrick objects to anyone's treating of the Bible, the Church or Christ himself as an authority in theological matters.

This was explained by me last May in 'Theology and Reason', my reply to Mr. Fitzpatrick's first contribution to the debate, but Mr. Fitzpatrick does not seem to have taken the point. To my charge that his article encouraged disrespect for rational argument, he replies in his 'Response' that in his article he had been 'comparing the merits of two components of reasoning', assigning 'logic an essential but subordinate role'. The passage in his article to which he expressly refers as illustrating this reads as follows:

I explained earlier that Lonergan is an intellectualist. He does

not regard knowledge as a branch of logic, as some epistemologists do, but rather assigns logic an essential but subordinate role in the movement from question to answer. For the intellectualist what is prized above all, what brings about progress, is insight, the understanding of the data. And for insight to occur there is required imagination, openness of mind, the ability to envisage a range of possibilities. Development of understanding consists of a series of verified imaginative leaps... In Lonergan's scheme the logico-deductive model of establishing theological conclusions is somewhat rudely demoted. (pp. 134—5)

Here the confusion between means and grounds is absolute. Insight is not a method of establishing the truth of a conclusion, but only of arriving at it: it is therefore not a component of reasoning in competition with logic, in favour of which logic might be demoted. Doubtless Euclid needed insight to hit on his proof that there is no greatest prime number; but, having arrived at it, he could not appeal to that fact in support of the proof. The proof, once presented, has to be evaluated by the canons of logic: it cannot be vindicated by the fact that Euclid arrived at it by exercising insight, nor would it be invalidated were it revealed that he reached it in a plodding fashion. Once this distinction is observed, Fitzpatrick's entire campaign for the demotion of logical reasoning collapses.

In his article Fitzpatrick said that the first, empirical phase of theological enquiry 'can be done by anyone'(p. 129), and insisted, against me, that doctrinal considerations should not be brought to bear upon this 'positive' phase of the enquiry; but, in his 'Response', he denies my conclusion that 'its results will be as acceptable to unbelievers as to believers'. The reason is that 'there is an immense difference between procedures and results' (p. 296). There is indeed; but, when the procedures are the same, one would surely expect the results to be by and large the same. No, says Fitzpatrick: 'differences of interpretation will nevertheless result because of differences in the interpreters—hence the importance of conversion'. He is right: since conclusions concerning these empirical matters will depend on subjective judgements of probability, different individual investigators will arrive at different conclusions. This, by itself, is irrelevant, however: the question is whether the conclusions of Christian investigators will systematically tend to differ from those of their atheist colleagues. Since Fitzpatrick goes on to say that 'such differences will not *necessarily* be along the lines of church allegiance' (his italics), it appears that they will not. If so, his objection to my saying that the results will be as acceptable to unbelievers as to believers falls to the ground: though there will be differences between one individual and another, there will be no general tendency

differentiating Christian scholars from atheist ones. Against this stands his 'hence the importance of conversion'. The remark about church allegiance turns out to be directed at me; for Fitzpatrick continues, 'Dummett's treatment of my article is, in fact, a powerful vindication of the notion of conversion. For it is, after all, the whole person who interrogates the text, interprets, judges and makes claims'; an implicit contrast with Mr. Fitzpatrick himself is clearly intended. The thesis evidently is that those who, like me, are nominally Roman Catholics, but may be recognised as being unconverted, will not interpret the texts any better than atheists; but the authentically converted will tend to interpret them correctly, and so manifest a large agreement among themselves.

Now, this is a surprise, because in Fitzpatrick's article conversion figured as 'the pivot from the positive to the normative phase' (p. 130), indeed, as the first of four stages into which the normative phase can be subdivided, and now it appears as a necessary preliminary for the positive phase also. Accepting this emendation to the theory, we may ask *why* authentically converted theologians who adopt the Lonergan/Fitzpatrick methodology are likely to agree in their results in the first phase. They have been resolutely prescinding from their Christian beliefs in forming conclusions on the empirical data; they have been estimating them only on the same basis as that available to an atheist enquirer: and yet Fitzpatrick denies that their results will be as acceptable to unbelievers as to believers. How come? I can only suppose that they will be *unconsciously* influenced by their beliefs; and I should think it better, and more honest, if the influence were conscious.

Theology, like philosophy, is a highly technical and professional subject. Yet it ought always to respect the accessibility of Christian belief to ordinary people untrained in its technicalities, and their capacity to understand it and think intelligently about it. I do not think that the scholastics ever forgot that respect, although they treated theology in a notably technical fashion. One who accepts Mr. Fitzpatrick's views, and believes himself to have been authentically converted, thinks that only those thus converted are capable of perceiving theological truths: there is no alternative route. The great mass of ordinary unconverted church members must therefore simply believe what they are told: not by Popes, bishops, councils or other outmoded authorities, but by the authentically converted theologians and exegetes. An ordinary Christian, if he aspired to more, would not merely have, for each specific point, to master a vast and complex literature: this would be of no help unless he were also converted. Such a theory would provide a temptation, which only heroic virtue could resist, to a monstrous spiritual and intellectual pride. There, if you like, is an argument *not* 'in the logico-deductive mode'; more exactly, it is an argument, not against the truth of the theory, but against the advisability of believing it. My objection to Fitzpatrick's theory is not

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merely that it is mistaken, or that it rests on a conceptual confusion. It is that I think it to be poisonous.

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In the June issue, in 'A Symbolic Theology', Dom Bede Griffiths gently takes me to task for treating 'abstract logical thought as a norm of human discourse'. Before the rise of this mode of thought in the first millennium B.C., he tells us, 'the universe was always apprehended as an integrated whole with three dimensions, physical, psychological and spiritual'; and in the Old Testament, although 'the historic basis is important', yet 'the historic event is interpreted in the light of its symbolic meaning', which 'is always the primary consideration'. I should in no way deny this; but I must venture a comment on the claim that 'this was fully understood in the ancient Church' (p. 291). As stated, the claim is undoubtedly true; but it should not be confused with the claim, often made, that the Fathers interpreted the Old Testament writings as symbolic in intent, rather than as literal narrative. If I understand them, their view was not at all that the human authors of the apparently historical books of the Old Testament were engaged in a symbolic mode of writing: they held them to be conveying the occurrence of actual events. Rather, it was God who used actual events in a symbolic manner, or as types of what would be understood only later. Certainly, the symbolic or typical content of these events was, for the Fathers, far more important than their significance for those who lived when they occurred: but we should not confuse this view with that stated by Dom Bede, that the human authors themselves wrote with a symbolic intention, not meaning to vouch for the occurrence of the events they narrated.

Dom Bede holds that much the same is true of the New Testament: in it, he tells us, 'the physical event is never seen as separate from its psychological and spiritual meaning' (p. 292). Again, I am far from denying this; but, just as it is wrong to concentrate on the physical event while disregarding its spiritual meaning, it is equally mistaken to proclaim the spiritual meaning while denying the occurrence of the physical event whose meaning it is; and this, it seems to me, Dom Bede is in danger of doing. Consider, for instance, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the crucifixion of Mani. The psychological and socio-political aspects of these two events are very similar: both illustrate the fact that political authorities frequently feel threatened by charismatic religious innovators, and sometimes have them put to death in cruel and humiliating ways. If the Christian faith is true, the spiritual significance of Christ's crucifixion is immeasurably greater than that of Mani, for it was the principal act of our redemption. But it could not have that



significance unless it had occurred: you can no more have the significance without the event than you can have the smile without the cat. Suppose some exegete suggested that, as a matter of fact, Jesus probably died a natural death, perhaps from some disease contracted from contact with the crowds; that the Evangelists were well aware of this fact; that the whole story of the passion and crucifixion, as narrated in the four Gospels, was intended purely symbolically, to convey that the first Christians had come to believe that Christ's acceptance of his death had a salvific power for mankind; and that, having come to understand this, we could perfectly well continue to recite the words 'was crucified under Pontius Pilate' in the sense intended by the Evangelists. It is not just that it defies belief that anyone should have written those words with no more than that intention; it is that, if we accepted this theory, we should no longer have the same belief about our salvation. I am not arguing that God could not have redeemed mankind by having his Son die a natural death: who am I to pronounce on what God could or could not do? I am saying only that you cannot just take the supposed significance of one event and transfer it to some quite different event; however we came to regard the presumed natural death of Jesus, we *could* not regard it as we now regard his death on the Cross.

Of course, no exegete says this, although it is precisely parallel to things they say about the empty tomb, the story of which appears in the Gospels simply as a continuation of the narrative. No exegete says this about the crucifixion, since it contains no miraculous elements, and, unable to believe in the miraculous, they determine what the Evangelists must have meant from what they personally feel able to believe. But the point holds good in all cases. About the Resurrection, Dom Bede says that its 'primary meaning' is that 'Jesus passed through death into eternal life, and has thereby made it possible for humanity as a whole' to do the same. But he goes on to say that 'the exact historical phenomenon is not of primary importance': 'the resurrection is not primarily the resuscitation of a corpse' (p. 292).

Well, now, I feel rather like this about the Ascension. Surely, there was a final leave-taking of Jesus from his disciples; and surely they understood that they would see him no more on earth; and surely they believed that he had been raised to glory, 'at the right hand of the Father', in what is unquestionably a symbolic phrase: but how it looked to them after the leave-taking, and whether they saw a vision or perceived some physical event, I do not think I know and doubt if anyone can determine. Here is a case in which the significance of the event is unaffected by these certainties. Much uncertainty surrounds the Resurrection, too; the Evangelists go out of their way to emphasise its mysterious character. They do not explain 'the exact historical phenomenon' because I do not suppose that they thought they knew it;

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nor does it appear that the apostles, or anyone else, knew it, either. Certainly the description 'the resuscitation of a corpse' fits extremely badly. Jesus brought Lazarus from the tomb *jam fetidum*, to resume ordinary human life and to die once more in the course of nature; but that was not his own condition after his Resurrection. He was never to die again; and a striking feature of the Gospel accounts is that none of the Apostles asks or speculates where Jesus is, or in what state he is, between his appearances to them.

But certainly *something* astonishing happened, and it certainly involved that Jesus's body was no longer in the tomb on Sunday morning or thereafter, and that it had not been stolen. Surely it also involved that the disciples saw him, touched him, spoke with him and ate with them. As Dom Bede says, there is some difficulty in arranging the Gospel accounts of the appearances into a coherent sequence, and chiefly in reconciling the 'He is going before you into Galilee: there you will see him' of Saints Matthew and Mark with the Jerusalem appearances. But, if we suppose that the Evangelists were not meaning to avow that any of the appearances occurred just as they described them, we still have to ask what they were at. The insistence that the appearances are not visions, and the details of Jesus's eating with the disciples, and inviting them to touch him, seem intended to ward off any purely symbolic interpretation by emphasising the reality of the Lord's physical presence. The details of his entry through closed doors and of his suddenly vanishing have the opposite effect; and always there is the mysterious difficulty of recognising him. It is hard to think of any explanation of these features save that that was just how it happened. Whatever the answers to these questions may be, we cannot attach the same significance to the Resurrection of Jesus if we suppose that his body remained and decomposed in the tomb: there would be no Resurrection to attach any significance to. We might believe that Jesus passed through death into eternal life, but it would then be a purely spiritual passage, and Christianity would be an entirely different religion. It is far easier to believe that, at death, the soul is liberated from the body, to begin a purely spiritual existence, than to believe in the resurrection of the body; but the former belief is incompatible with a correct understanding of the relation between soul and body, and the Christian hope of further life has always depended absolutely on the hope of bodily resurrection. There is, as St. Paul said, no such hope unless Christ rose bodily from the grave. It is useless to reply to this that it represents an improper concentration upon mere physical events: bodily resurrection is a physical event, and its non-occurrence cannot have the same spiritual significance as its occurrence.

Much the same applies to the virginal conception of Jesus. Of course, the bare physical fact, stripped of its spiritual significance, would

be just an extraordinary physical fact; but here is again a case in which you cannot easily keep the significance and dispense with the fact: I take Fr. Timothy Radcliffe to be saying the same in his article (March, p. 120). St Matthew tells us that Joseph, being a just man, was minded to divorce Mary privately when he discovered her to be with child. If he had been the father, this intention would not have been that of a just man. The detail, if false, would have been an idiotically risky one to include merely to back up a purely symbolically intended story of Mary's virginity; and it, or the fact behind it, in fact led to Jewish calumny that Jesus had been conceived in adultery. Again, I do not deny that God, had he chosen, might have allowed him to be so conceived. I say only that that is not what has been delivered to us, or enshrined in the Creeds; and that our belief is not of a kind that remains unaffected by such 'physical' details.

Dom Bede's opposition between abstract logical thought and symbolic thought is, in my view, misleading. I take the content of a thought—any thought—to be determined by what is required to render it true. The use of symbolism is natural to human beings, whose lives are impoverished without it; it occurs in many contexts besides the expression of thoughts, but, of course, in that context also. A symbolic expression of a thought is often far richer than a precise, analytical one; it has more resonance, suggests further connections, and, very often, expresses more than one thought in a single sentence. On the other hand, it is obviously far less well adapted for displaying the precise content of the thought expressed. A creative process of thinking may find its natural expression in symbolic terms, and to express disdain for that would indicate poverty of imagination. For all that, enquiry into precise content—analytical enquiry—is not out of place in any subject-matter whatever; a thought could be intrinsically resistant to such analysis only if it lacked any definite content, and therefore was not a genuine thought at all.

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The foregoing was written before I had the pleasure of seeing Fr. Brian Davies's article for the September number, 'Why Should We Believe It?'. Naturally I am very pleased that at least one contributor to the discussion has written, very lucidly, in my support, and has, in his own style, and citing points made by St. Thomas, put forward similar arguments. I had thought of commenting on Fr. Radcliffe's remarks about Christ's *ipsissima verba* (p. 118), but, happily, Fr. Davies has very pithily said what needed saying on that score. Some who have written to me privately have remarked, about the term 'Son of Man', that it was only natural that the Evangelists should put on our Lord's lips the title

that Christians had subsequently accorded him; I might complement Fr. Davies's observations on the subject by repeating that there is little sign that the title was used in the early Church: in the New Testament, it occurs all but exclusively in the Gospels.

'The Philosophers and the China Shop', Eamon Duffy's reply to Fr. Davies of two months ago, strikes me, I am afraid, as a textbook illustration of certain of the vices prevalent in much modern theological writing. With much in it I find myself in agreement, and I expect that Fr. Davies does also. These parts consist in somewhat platitudinous reflections on the process by which dogmas came to be formulated; but then I find, with surprise, that they are presented to readers as controverting my views and those of Fr. Davies. Thinking that I must have missed something, I search the text to discover just where Dr. Duffy perceives the opposition as lying. I find some caricatures of the opinions I put forward, which suggest that perhaps no more than a misunderstanding is involved; but I find also some utterly cloudy pronouncements on matters that demand clarity if anything useful is to be said, even if not as part of a debate. These pronouncements are offered, it appears later in the article, as a defence, not necessarily of the truth of the views forming the alleged consensus with which the debate began, but at least of their consistency with Catholic belief. (Whether it is a genuine consensus has since long become a secondary question.)

We recite it every Sunday, but it may nevertheless be useful here to cite an excerpt from the Creed. We profess our belief

in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven and became incarnate by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary and was made man.

Let us now look at Dr. Duffy's gloss on this:

the divinity of Jesus is not a 'fact' about him, like the facts that he was male and Jewish: it would be a category error to say of him that he was tall, dark and heavenly. To confess his divinity is not to admit something extra about him, over and above his humanity, but to adopt a particular stance towards his humanity, to declare that by attending to that humanity we are at one and the same time attending to the very voice of God. (p.449)

Whatever the passage from Dr Duffy's article may mean, it cannot possibly be made to mean anything consonant with the passage from the Creed. In the Creed, the divinity of Jesus Christ is not presented as something extra and added to his humanity; it is his humanity which was,

by a special act of divine mercy, added to his divinity. If you believe the Creed, what sense can it have to say that Jesus Christ's having been begotten before all ages and having been the one through whom all things were made is not something 'over and above his humanity'? If you do not believe the Creed, what is the point of an analysis of the process by which it came?

What *do* Dr. Duffy's remarks mean? The observation that 'the divinity of Jesus is not a "fact" about him, like the facts that he was male and Jewish' is a perfect instance of that studied ambiguity of expression with which theological writing of this kind abounds. Does Dr. Duffy mean that Christ's divinity is not a fact at all, or merely that it is a fact of a different kind from the facts that he was male and Jewish? The text affords no clue, not even the remark about a category error. I do not know whether Dr. Duffy would consider it a category error to say of someone that he was tall, dark and courageous, or whether he is making a different point: if the latter, then I think he must suppose the phrase 'Mother of God' to involve a category error. It is hardly worth saying that Christ's divinity is not a fact of the same kind as his being male; but if Dr. Duffy means that it is not a fact at all, he owed us a careful discussion of the notion of a fact, not a throw-away line. The point that matters is that the divinity of Jesus Christ is something you may believe or disbelieve, and that it makes a great deal of difference to your religion, if you have one, which you do. To reduce belief in it to 'a particular stance towards his humanity' is to mock those who have fervently adhered to that belief, and those who have fervently opposed it too. The prophets prefaced their messages with 'Thus says the Lord', and the Creed endorses their claim; they would have thought it blasphemy to have claimed to be God. Those who framed the Creed intended to say that Jesus was very much more than a prophet.

For the most part, however, Dr. Duffy contents himself with caricaturing the views of myself and Fr. Davies. He writes, for instance, 'Fr. Davies seems wedded to a narrowly propositional model, in which Jesus actually tells his disciples "I am God" or "There are three persons in one God".' (p.449) If there were any reason to suppose that Jesus ever uttered a sentence that could be rendered 'There are three persons in one God', it would be because it was recorded in the New Testament. It is not; and neither Fr. Davies nor I ever suggested that he did. Fr. Davies wrote that Christ 'said enough to allow us to conclude to the truth of this belief' (p.366) and I, in a phrase that Dr. Duffy quotes, wrote similarly that he 'said enough for us to come to understand him as communicating it' (Dec. 1987, p.563) Our argument was that belief either in Christ's divinity or in the Trinity would be without warrant if one could say, with the adherents to the consensus, that Jesus had not the remotest idea of such things, or if he did not say what it was possible to come to recognise

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as conveying them. (Those readers who share the modern theologian's horror of 'facts' and 'propositions' may gloss 'conveying them' as 'conveying that they are to be believed'; it can hardly be denied that the Creed is an affirmation of what we believe.) Neither of us denied that there were other data, besides the recorded words of Jesus; in replying to Professor Lash, I expressly referred to the need for consideration of his life and death if we are to reject the hypotheses, mentioned by Dr. Duffy, that he was mad or a charlatan. (I here refrain from adding 'and resurrection' to 'life and death', lest I be told that his resurrection is not a 'fact over and above' his life and death.) Neither of us cast doubt on the crucial role of the Holy Spirit's guidance of Christian reflection; again, I expressly referred to it. In speaking of 'more explicit consequences', I was opposing the view I understood (and still understand) Professor Lash to be holding, that new truths are continuously revealed to us. It can hardly be denied that the statements in the Creed quoted above are more explicit formulations than are to be found in the New Testament; it is not reasonable to read the phrase as implying that the former followed from the latter by strict deductive argument. As for St. John's Gospel, it does not seem to me to read as intended to convey that Jesus delivered all those long speeches as they there appear; by contrast, all four Gospels clearly represent him as referring to himself as 'Son of Man'. Dr. Duffy is not the first in this debate to combat my arguments, and now those of Fr. Davies, by propounding crude misrepresentations of our views, and then attacking their 'a-prioristic simple-mindedness', etc.; but it is not by such forensic devices that truth is to be wooed.

What I have missed most, in the majority of the contributions, all, save Fr. Davies's, hostile to my viewpoint, has been any attempt to answer the arguments I advanced. Dr. Gifford reproached me with being out of touch with current trends in the western intellectual tradition (p. 335), and Professor Lash condemned me for 'flat-footed and anachronistic literalism' (1987, p. 556); but no-one seemed concerned to respond to my challenge to produce an alternative rationale for membership of the Catholic Church or an account, differing from mine, of what grounds exist for believing Catholic doctrine under however new and strange an interpretation. Well, there are many divergent trends in contemporary thought, to some of which I feel very hostile, and with others of which I think I am in harmony: but it seems to me that we serve the truth best if we concentrate on being loyal to rationality, and forget about whether or not we are abreast of the times. In a hundred years' time, some of those living now may be praised for having held on to truths that most of their contemporaries had forgotten, and some for having perceived new ones that had escaped almost everyone else; but none will be praised for saying exactly the same as everyone around them. I think that, in Britain and the United States, most theologians suspect that professional philosophers in

those countries are peasants, so far as their understanding of religion goes; it is different, they feel, in those countries in which the great luminaries like Heidegger and Derrida flourish or have flourished. I shall reinforce their suspicion by declaring that what I believe to be a decadent strand in contemporary philosophy has contributed to the decadence of much contemporary theology.

**1 November 1988**

**PREVIOUS CONTRIBUTORS TO THE DEBATE**

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by Michael Dummett (1)  
*Wykeham Professor of Logic in the University of Oxford.*  
*current address: Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, 202 Junipero Serra Blvd., Stanford, CA 94305, USA*
- December 1987: Vol 68 No. 809, pp. 424–431.  
a) 'A Leaky Sort of Thing? The divisiveness of Michael Dummett'  
by Nicholas Lash  
*Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge.*  
*The Divinity School, St. John's St., Cambridge CB2 1TW*  
Vol 68 No. 811, pp. 552–557.  
b) 'Unsafe Premises: a reply to Nicholas Lash'  
by Michael Dummett (2)  
ibid. pp. 558–566.
- March 1988: a) 'Interrogating the Consensus: a response to Michael Dummett'  
by Timothy Radcliffe OP  
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*address from January: St Dominic's Priory, 16 Southampton Rd., London NW5 4HX*  
Vol 69 No. 814, pp. 116–126.  
b) 'Lonergan's Method and the Dummett-Lash Dispute'  
by Joseph Fitzpatrick (1)  
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ibid. 126–138.
- May 1988: 'Theology and Reason'  
by Michael Dummett (3)  
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- June 1988: a) 'A Symbolic Theology',  
by Bede Griffiths  
*Benedictine monk; writer. Saccidananda Ashram, Shanthivanam, Kulithalai, Tiruchi Dt., Tamil Nadu, India*  
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b) Response: 'Michael Dummett's "Theology and Reason"  
by Joseph Fitzpatrick (2).  
ibid. pp. 295–6.
- July/August 1988: 'The Certainty of Change: questioning Brown's answer to Dummett's problem',  
by Paul J. Gifford  
*until recently of the University of Zimbabwe; now Lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, The University, Leeds LS2 9JT*  
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- Sept 1988: 'Why Should We Believe It?'  
by Brian Davies OP  
*Vice-Regent of Studies in the English Dominican Province; Reviews Editor of 'New Blackfriars'. Blackfriars, Oxford, OX1 3LY*  
Vol 69 No. 819, pp.360—368.
- October 1988: 'The Philosophers and the China Shop: a reply to Brian Davies'  
by Eamon Duffy  
*Fellow and Tutor of Magdalene College, Cambridge; Lecturer in the Faculty of Divinity. Magdalene College, Cambridge CB3 0AG*  
Vol 69 No. 820, pp. 447—452.
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## Of Conkers and Kites

Nicholas Donnelly

Once my prayers  
were like sticks thrown up,  
high up, to knock conkers down.  
Seen from below  
God was the upmost dark seed,  
my aching arms never reached.  
In morning's light,  
gone was the prized onecer,  
lost, a secret in hurricane.  
The green shell,  
my Bible, God's shape hinting;  
strong, the dark wood smell.  
At a loss,  
God's measure, an empty hollow,  
I ran from the stark tree.

Now my prayer  
is like running a kite out,  
let loose, into open sky.  
The pay-out a struggle  
until tightening,  
caught up in God's rise.  
All my body braced,  
to hold down the prayer,  
so alive in the slip wind.  
As sudden dropped,  
God's face turned away;  
left falling in the lee.  
A hard art, childhood;  
joy and sorrow,  
playing God's high summer.