

# The Philosophers and the China Shop: A Reply to Brian Davies

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Rallying to the flag first raised by Professor Michael Dummett a year ago, Fr Brian Davies has parachuted heavily down on what I suppose we must call the Dummett-Lash battlefield, though the theological poppies have now been nourished by the blood of other combatants. Not least of these is Fr Davies' own Provincial, Timothy Radcliffe.

In 'Why Should We Believe It?' (printed in last month's *New Blackfriars*, pp. 360—368) Fr Davies is clearly worried by Fr Radcliffe's opinion that a Catholic is 'not committed to saying that any single saying of Jesus in the Gospels exactly reports the words of that historical person' since it is possible 'that in every instance his sayings have been redacted in the light of his subsequent death and resurrection, and of the theological concerns of the gospel writers' (*NB* March 1988, p. 118). On the contrary, according to Fr Davies, Catholic faith depends for its very existence on clear reportage of Jesus' own words. The Gospels 'make some pretty extraordinary claims': that Jesus is God incarnate, for example, and that by his cross and resurrection he conquered sin and death. We can only believe such extraordinary things if 'sufficiently informed by one who is God and by one who knows what he is talking about' (pp 361—6).

It would, I assume, be universally agreed among Catholics that we need to be 'sufficiently informed' by God about what is saving truth. The debate turns on just what might count as being 'sufficiently informed'. Fr Davies seems to think that it means one properly qualified chap telling the rest of us facts about God. If we are to believe that Jesus is divine or God is Trinity then Jesus himself must know these things, and must tell us so in so many words, for only a divine person's word would be sufficient warrant for something so baffling. There are all sorts of problems about this account of the matter, not the least being the danger of circularity. For how can we know that the one who is telling us this *is* in fact divine, and not a madman or a charlatan? The traditional rationalising answer to this question was to point to prophecy and miracle as 'proofs' of Jesus' divinity. In many respects Fr Davies' article belongs firmly in the tradition of post-reformation Catholic rationalism, but this particular response seems closed to him. He explicitly rules out miracles, even the resurrection, as proofs, insisting that 'nothing you can observe or record as historical data will entitle you to say that anyone is divine' (p. 363), and, even more

starkly, that 'the story of Jesus, however we reconstruct it, does not warrant calling him divine' (p. 366).

Circular or not, however, the main concern of Davies' argument is to establish the necessity of the accuracy of the Gospels, and he offers an analogy to illustrate why:

Smith gives testimony in a law court. He is the only witness to a certain conversation with Jones, and in offering his account he repeatedly says that Jones referred to himself as the man sent to read the gas meter. He also gives an account of other things said by Jones. But for some reason or other, it becomes clear that Jones never referred to himself as the man sent to read the gas meter. How should the judge direct the jury concerning the rest of Smith's testimony? (p. 362)

The jury, of course, must discount everything the unreliable witness has said, and just so, if the Gospels report that Jesus referred to himself as Son of Man, we must either believe that he actually did so or suspend judgement on everything else they tell us about him.

But is it sensible to impose on the New Testament the sort of strait-jacket implied in this rather depressing analogy? Granted that the truth of the Gospels is of vital importance to Christians, is it a single sort of truth, and one that can usefully be compared to court-room testimony? In fact Fr Davies thinks that questions of this sort can be settled by a knock-down argument 'without engaging with the arguments of those' who disagree with him (p. 367), as breath-taking a piece of philosophical smugness as I have ever encountered. But surely any discussion of just what sort of truth the New Testament offers must involve *some* attention to the sort of documents the Gospels are. No text interprets itself. We need to know the reasons why we should not read the Gospels in the same way as we read, let us say, the Book of Revelation (which also reports purported words of Jesus).

But Fr Davies engages in nothing so unphilosophical as actually attending to the Gospel texts. Had he done so he would have found himself face to face with varieties and types of discourse which make his a-prioristic simple-mindedness about their self-evident factual and literal truth highly problematic. He does indeed acknowledge some of the difficulties of treating the Gospels as straight reportage when he says that

People who report what other people say rarely provide the equivalent of a stenographer's report. They leave words out.

They paraphrase. They embellish. (p. 363)

But this is ludicrously inadequate as an account of the very striking contrast between, say, the 'voice' of the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels and that of the Jesus of St John, between a teacher whose characteristic form of utterance is the aphorism and the vividly realised parable, and one who speaks in chapter-length paragraphs of closely-knit theological exposition, rich in

symbolism and sacramental reference. To say that St John is in any simple sense 'reporting what Jesus said' is to beg all the important questions.

I am not of course denying any historical basis to the Johannine Jesus, but it seems clear that Fr Davies' a-prioristic approach and preoccupation with 'substantial accuracy' in the Gospels has rendered him insensitive to their actual literary reality. A widely accepted account of the differences between the Johannine and Synoptic gospels is that John offers an extended theological reflection on the meaning of Jesus, incorporating authentic sayings and works, but exploring them in the light of the resurrection and the Church's experience of the Spirit and her sacramental life. Who could unpick the fabric of John's testimony to find the 'facts' being 'reported', and what would be the point of such an exercise? *Mutatis mutandis*, similar problems arise in the exegesis of the synoptics, but it is supremely the Johannine writings which have nourished Trinitarian and Incarnational theology from patristic times to the present. Where does all this leave Fr Davies' court-room simplicities and—speaking without impiety—his demand for direct Trinitarian teaching straight from the horse's mouth?

And this brings me to Fr Davies' account of what it might be for God to *reveal* something to us. For Fr Davies, revelation consists essentially of the passing on of pieces of information, of being *told* something about God, 'in a perfectly ordinary everyday sense' (p. 366). He warmly endorses Professor Dummett's contention that 'We would have no valid ground for believing so extraordinary a doctrine as the Trinity ... unless Jesus knew that fact concerning God and said enough for us to come to understand him as communicating it' (*NB Dec.* 1987, p. 563). Revealed truths are thus 'facts' about God, passed on in parcels of words.

This is a notion that bristles with difficulties: 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.

Clearly, this has profound implications when we come to consider what might be involved in the revelation of such truths, but 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'. Following Professor Dummett, he rejects Professor Lash's contention that the doctrine of the Trinity is 'the fruit of Christian reflection, guided ... by God's Spirit, on who he was who was born and died for us' (*NB Dec.* 1987, p. 556). Ignoring the crucial phrase 'guided by the Spirit', and equating 'reflection' here with 'reason', Fr Davies insists that 'we need more than reflection ... we need to be taught by God. If reason cannot demonstrate the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine will have to be revealed' (p. 365).

A wholly false dichotomy has been set up here. Lash is not suggesting that the doctrine of the Trinity, instead of being taught by God, is derived from a purely rational process called 'reflection'. He is simply indicating the way in which revelation is mediated to the Church—by prayerful reflection, under the guidance of the Spirit, on the ministry and person of Jesus. I think it was Kierkegaard who said that Christianity began when the disciples found themselves asking about the ascended Christ 'Who was that? What was that?' Certainly the Christological and Trinitarian debates of the first five centuries seem to have been the product of just such a process of urgent and wondering enquiry. The questioning was existential, for what was involved was not an attempt to deduce the right propositions from Jesus's words, but a struggle to find a speech in which his and God's name could be uttered without obscuring or betraying the salvation they knew by daily experience he had achieved for them and the world they sought to evangelise.

In that struggle for utterance, Jesus' teaching about his own person and his relation to the Father were of course an integral and central element, but they were not the only data. Indeed, he had enacted his Divinity far more clearly than he articulated it, and it is hard to see how it could have been otherwise, for what sort of knowledge would it be for a man to *know* that he was God? His healing miracles, his Lordship over the Sabbath and the interpretation of the Law, his claim to forgive sins, his Eucharistic interpretation of his coming death as the establishment by God of a New Covenant, his resurrection from the dead and the lived experience of his Spirit as an enabling power and presence within the community—all these were as important for the church's recognition and confession of just who her Lord was, and his place within the Godhead, as any explicit Trinitarian teaching. And the very process of recognition itself was perceived not as the result of accurate thinking, what Professor Dummett calls 'the drawing out of more explicit consequences from a set of data', but as a work of divine pedagogy, a manifestation within the Church of the life of that Spirit which they knew with growing clarity to be the life of God himself.

This is an issue which lies close to the centre of the whole Lash-Dummett debate. Fr Davies seems to advocate what Rowan Williams recently characterised as 'a model of truth as something ultimately separable in our minds from the dialectical process of its historical reflection and appropriation ... an impatience with learning, and with learning about our learning' ('Trinity and Revelation', *Modern Theology* 2:3 1986, pp. 197ff.). For Fr Davies this involves the crudest of dichotomies—a revealed truth is a fact handed over in so many words, 'in a perfectly ordinary everyday sense, someone has to tell us something'. Professor Lash's talk of Spirit-guided reflection on the person and work of Jesus can therefore be dismissed as an attempt to derive divine truth from mere human 'reason'. Professor Dummett is aware that the issue is more complex: he sees that Lash's

position involves the recognition of revelation, but he thinks that it obliges us to accept an account of doctrinal development as a process of *addition* to the original revelation, 'not the drawing out of more explicit consequences from a set of data, but the addition to those data of "fresh certainties", which I take to be newly revealed truths' (*NB* Dec. 1987 p. 564).

There is a paradox here, for Professor Dummett's formulation seems to land him in just that rationalist dilemma which Fr Davies attributes to Professor Lash. How do he and Fr Davies think the Church got from the words of Jesus in the Gospels—such as his claim to be the 'Son of Man'—to the very different sort of formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon? According to Professor Dummett, by 'drawing out more explicit consequences from a set of data'. But is this not to base our faith on an inference, the robustness of our deductive powers, rather than on God's self-giving in revelation? Heresy becomes a mere failure in logic, orthodoxy the successful conclusion of a line of argument. And in fact, it is now nearly thirty years since Owen Chadwick's *From Bossuet to Newman* demonstrated the origin of such 'deductive' accounts of doctrinal 'development' in the Catholic rationalism of the early modern period. It is an approach which, every bit as much as liberal Protestantism, renders Christian history an irrelevance. On such a model, for example, what possible sense can be made of the five centuries of life and death struggle involved in the Church's formulation of its Trinitarian and Christological faith, to say nothing of the two millennia before it arrived at the doctrines of Immaculate Conception and Assumption?

Education, rather than deduction, seems to offer a better account of what is involved, and in such an educative process we need not, as Professor Dummett fears, posit any new revelation. It is perfectly possible to acknowledge the once-for-all character of God's self-revelation in Christ, without imagining that Jesus handed over to us in so many words all that we need to know about God. (He patently did not do so in the case of doctrines such as the Divinity of the Spirit or the Assumption of our Lady.) It is part of the power of that self-revelation that it continues to yield fresh meaning, strength and challenge to those who place their living, suffering and dying in its light. Rowan Williams has suggested that revelation is essentially 'to do with what is *generative* in our experience—events or transactions in our language that break existing frames of reference and initiate new possibilities of life' (*loc.cit.* p. 199). It is supremely the life and death of Jesus which constitutes this generative event for us, and in that sense Jesus is and remains God's last Word, to which nothing can or need be added. But the implications and meaning of that Word will go on unfolding so long as humanity endures. To the truths that emerge from this dialectic between God's Word, enacted once for all in Jesus, and the struggle of suffering humanity to embody that Word in their own lives, there is no deductive short-cut.

More is at stake here than an attempt to describe how it was that the Church once came to confess the divinity of Christ or of the Holy Spirit. The repudiation or suspicion of the dialectic I have described prescribes a particular sort of response to the whole enterprise of theology. From the understanding of revealed truth as a circumscribable package of words which Fr Davies and Professor Dummett seem to share, a straight road runs to the intellectual-totalitarianism which has so often in the past crippled Catholic theology, and which in our day threatens to do so again. Professor Dummett has explicitly disavowed any desire for inquisition or heresy-hunts. Yet underpinning his and Fr Davies' position seems to lie a desire to make some words at least absolute, and such fundamentalism is the bed-rock of all heresy-hunts. It is worth recalling that this whole debate was initiated by Professor Dummett in an article in which, on the evidence of a book review, he alleged the existence of a 'remarkable consensus' among Catholic seminary teachers holding a 'whole battery of liberal Protestant beliefs which they are chary of revealing to their flocks', and which are 'helping to transform the Church into something distinctly fraudulent' (*NB* Oct. 1987, p. 431).

It is this which makes so dismaying Professor Dummett's confession that he 'only' wants 'an authoritative pronouncement on the limits of admissible reinterpretation of the articles of the Creed' (p. 566). What would such an authoritative pronouncement have to look like, if it were not to be so general as to be mere platitude, or so specific as to smother legitimate intellectual exploration? Such chilling *a-priorism*, equalled only by Fr Davies' confidence that he can settle the question of the character of Gospel truth without studying 'the arguments of those who disagree with me', reminds me forcefully of Gerard Manley Hopkins' criticism of Browning's poetry, for its 'way of talking with the air and spirit of a man bouncing up from table with his mouth full of bread and cheese and saying that he meant to stand no blasted nonsense'. Bread and cheese is excellent fare, and even theologians are capable of benefiting from a dose of common-sense. But theology, like other intellectual disciplines, has its own necessary skills, its accumulated store of achievement. Simple solutions to complex problems are always wrong. When we are offered by Professor Dummett a round condemnation of the conspiracy of the seminary exegetes, or a discussion of doctrinal development which ignores or dismisses two hundred years of theological reflection, or are told by Fr Davies he knows what sort of truth the Gospels offer us without the tiresome necessity of studying 'the arguments of those who disagree with me' or even the Gospels themselves, I hear the bellowing of bulls above the noise of breaking china.

*Editor: This debate will close in December with a winding-up article by Michael Dummett.*