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A Symbolic Theology

Bede Griffiths

Professor Michael Dummett, in the article in *New Blackfriars* which has stirred up so much controversy, 'A Remarkable Consensus' (October 1987, pp. 424—431), seems to have taken as a criterion of Catholic faith what Avery Dulles, calls in his book *Models of Revelation* a propositional model of revelation. Professor Dummett is a distinguished logician. No doubt, then, he is accustomed to think of abstract logical thought as a norm of human discourse. But, if it is religious discourse we are considering, this is an assumption which can be extremely misleading. As Avery Dulles says, it tends to 'reduce meaning and intelligibility to the narrow confines of conceptual logic'. In place of this Dulles suggests a symbolic model of revelation, which seems to me to give much more meaning to faith and to present a much more convincing model of the Church.

The proposition which Professor Dummett proposes as fundamental to a Catholic understanding of the Church, that 'it is enjoined on us, whatever the provocation, never to take any step to disrupt the unity of the Church' (p. 424), seems particularly unsatisfactory. In the first place, as Dummett acknowledges in regard to the schism between the Eastern and the Western Church, there is the problem of who was responsible for the split. And there is the further problem, that Dummett thinks that the Protestant Reformers 'did not even pretend to form a rival Catholic Church' (p. 425).

This, however, is a minor point. It is the whole idea of a propositional model of revelation which needs to be questioned—even at the risk of repeating here much that is familiar.

No serious religious revelation has ever been given in terms of abstract logical thought. Whether it is the Vedas, the Bible or the Koran, all were given in the form not of logical but of symbolic thought. Abstract logical thought separates the idea from reality, mind from matter, soul from body. It is a way of thinking that is ultimately an inheritance from the Greeks, but its present domination of the human mind is an inheritance from Descartes, with his disastrous split between mind and matter. Before Descartes, though logical thought had its place (and was already over-developed in scholastic theology), it was still contained within the wider and deeper framework of symbolic thought. Even then, one has only to compare St Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* with the New Testament to see the difference between abstract logical thought and symbolic revelation.

Karl Rahner has gone so far as to say that all sense phenomena are symbols, that is, signs by which reality is made present to human consciousness. The universe does not exist as we perceive it, but is made present to our consciousness by means of the sensible signs of sight and hearing, touch and taste and smell. We know that at the atomic level these phenomena have a totally different appearance and at the sub-atomic level they disappear altogether in waves of energy. But again, scientists are beginning to realise that all scientific theories are symbolic models of the universe. They are like maps, useful as far as they go, but immeasurably remote from the actual reality.

Before the rise of abstract logical thought in the first millennium before Christ the universe was always apprehended as an integrated whole with three dimensions, physical, psychological and spiritual. Every material being was understood to have a psychological and a spiritual aspect. This comes out most clearly in the Vedic revelation, where, for instance, Agni, the god of fire, is seen first of all in his physical aspect with his 'flaming hair', but then in his psychological aspect as the fire of the mind, the 'all-knower', and finally as the energy which pervades the universe, the symbol of the universal Spirit. This

understanding is common to all ancient religion, to the Australian Aborigines, the American Indians, the African Bushmen. The three aspects were, of course, not clearly distinguished. It is the function of the rational mind precisely to distinguish the different aspects of the one global reality. But the danger is that as the rational, analytical mind takes over, it gradually loses the sense of the whole, of an organic universe in which every aspect mirrors every other aspect and is a symbol of the whole

This symbolic universe is the universe of the Bible. The Biblical revelation, as distinguished from the Cosmic revelation of the Vedas, is a historical revelation. It is concerned with persons and events, but these persons and events are always seen in the context of their psychological and spiritual meaning. The Bible, like all ancient history, is not interested in 'facts' in themselves, that is, in phenomena deprived of their meaning. It looks always to the meaning of the event rather than to its appearance. In some cases the person or event may have no historical basis. Adam and Eve, for instance, are purely symbolic figures, representing Man and Woman (though an abstract logical exegesis tried to turn them into historical persons). Cain and Abel may have some historic basis, but their significance is that they are symbols of the agricultural and pastoral peoples and their rivalry. Noah again may have some historical background, but the story is obviously symbolic of salvation from destruction seen in the context of a universal divine providence. When we come to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we come nearer to the sphere of history proper, but the stories are based on legends, which have been pieced together and are not fully historical. With Moses arguably we come to a definite historical character but the story of the plagues of Egypt, the Exodus and the Journey through the desert are in many respects legendary, the record of an epic saga. Always myth and history go together, the historic event is interpreted in the light of its symbolic meaning. Throughout the Bible the search is for meaning rather than for a precise record of an event. In other words, the Bible is a form of symbolic history. The historic basis is important and this differentiates it from the epics and puranas of Hindu tradition, but the symbolic meaning of the event is always the primary consideration. This was fully understood in the ancient Church but has largely been lost sight of today.

When we come to the New Testament the same principle prevails. The New Testament is undoubtedly the record of a historic event. It takes place in the full light of history, 'in the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea and Herod being Tetrach of Galilee'. These are all definite historical persons. The birth and life and death of Jesus are also historical facts, which cannot reasonably be disputed. But, again, the interest of the writers of the New Testament is

not primarily in the precise historical events but in their universal meaning, that is, in their symbolism. The physical event is never seen as separate from its psychological and spiritual meaning. At times the writer may make use of stories which are not strictly historical, as in the infancy narratives, and the precise relation between symbol and fact is often not easy to determine. But for the writers themselves these distinctions were not so important. It was the total reality of the story of Christ with all the dimensions of its meaning which they wished to communicate. If we bear this in mind, we can overcome the difficulties presented by the stories of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection.

The story of the Virgin Birth or, rather, the virginal conception of Jesus is not primarily concerned with the physical virginity of Mary. The significance of the event in the eyes of the evangelist is that Jesus was 'born of God'. He was 'conceived by the Holy Spirit'; the child which was to be born would be a 'holy child'. This is the primary meaning of the event which is described. In the same way the virginity of Mary is not primarily a matter of physical virginity. A virgin is not simply someone who has not had intercourse with a man; a virgin is a maiden who is not merely physically but psychologically pure; who is 'pure in heart'. Mary was virgin because she was pure in heart, without any human attachment, so that she was able to conceive the Word of God in her heart and to bear him in her body. What precisely this involved from a physical point of view, it is impossible to say. The theory that her hymen was not broken at the birth of Jesus will strike many people today as extremely odd, though it was believed by St Thomas Aquinas and held to be orthodox. The evangelists themselves were certainly not interested in such matters. It was the psychological and spiritual meaning of the event which interested them. No doubt the physical virginity of Mary has come to be generally accepted, but it should not be given primary importance. Personally I have no difficulty in believing in it, but I see no reason why those who find difficulty over it should be considered to have denied the Catholic faith.

It is the same with the resurrection of Jesus. The primary meaning of the resurrection of Jesus is that Jesus passed through death into eternal life, and has thereby made it possible for humanity as a whole to pass through death to eternal life. The exact nature of the events which took place after the body of Jesus was laid in the tomb cannot be determined. It is notoriously difficult to reconcile the different accounts of his appearances to the disciples. These stories are intended to make it clear that the body and soul of Jesus were not left under the dominion of death, but were raised up to a new life. Again, the exact historical phenomenon is not of primary importance—if it had been the evangelists would have been much more careful in recording the event. The Resurrection is not primarily the resuscitation of a corpse any more than

the Virgin Birth is primarily an example of parthenogenesis. Of themselves these things would have had very little significance; but they could rather be regarded as freaks of nature. The writers of the Gospels were concerned to show that the child which was born of Mary was 'conceived of the Holy Spirit' and was the 'Son of God' and that the body and soul of Jesus which were surrendered to death on the cross were raised up by God to eternal life. The 'mechanics' of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection were not their concern and Christians today who question the phenomenal aspect of these events, but accept their meaning and significance for themselves and for humanity as a whole, should not be considered as lacking in Christian faith.

The whole problem arises on account of the obsession of the western mind with the belief that the physical aspect of reality observed by the rational mind is objectively real and anything beyond this is subjective and comparatively unreal. The Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, therefore, must be observable facts or else they cannot be true and are merely subjective beliefs. But this separation between subject and object, mind and matter, body and soul, has today been overcome by science itself. It is simply a hang-over from the past. The universe as we understand it to-day is an integrated whole, in which subject and object, mind and matter, body and soul form an interdependent organic whole. Reality has three dimensions, physical, psychological and spiritual, which cannot be separated. Seen in this context, which is that of all the ancient world and of the Bible as a whole, the problem of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection and the miracles of Jesus are no longer problems but integral elements in a cosmic whole.

As regards Jesus's understanding of himself (a question which has cropped up again and again in the debate initiated by Professor Dummett), it is impossible for us today to say exactly how Jesus conceived of himself. Of course, to suggest that he understood himself to be the 'Second Person of the Trinity made Man' is ludicrous. The words 'person' and 'trinity' were not in his vocabulary. They are products of Greek culture, which is quite alien to him. We cannot say with certainty how he expressed himself, since he spoke in Aramaic and we have only Greek translations of his speech, which were, moreover, edited and arranged at a later date. All we can say with certainty is how his disciples of the first and second generations conceived of him. This is the only revelation which has been given us. From this we can say that the disciples conceived of Jesus in the light of the revelation of the Old Testament and there is no reason why Jesus should not have conceived of himself in the same terms. They saw him first as the Prophet proclaimed by Moses, who was to come at the end of time, and as the Son of Man of the book of Daniel, who was to come on the clouds of heaven and usher in the kingdom of God. Then they saw him as the servant of Yahweh of

Isaiah, who was to bear the sins of the world and to bring salvation to his people. Finally, Jesus was seen as the Son of God, of whom it was said in the psalm, 'You are my son, this day I have begotten you'. Thus the figure of Jesus was built up, until in St John's Gospel it could be declared that he was the 'Word of God', the Word by which the world had been created and which had come to the prophets revealing the mind and will of God, and had now 'become flesh' in Jesus. This is a coherent development showing the impact of the person of Jesus on his disciples and their followers and this is what has come down to us as the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Whether Jesus intended to found a Church in our sense is open to question. The Church which he founded was rather the 'eschatological Church', the Church of the end of time, of which he said to his apostles: 'You shall sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel'. The Church as we know it emerged in the second century following what his disciples believed to be the mind and will of God, The faith of a Christian is in the testimony of the apostolic Church, that is, the Church of the first century, which has come down to us in the form of the New Testament. We cannot get behind this to say what exactly Jesus himself said or thought about himself, though we are free to speculate about it. But this is a matter of speculation, not of faith.

The history of theology in the West has been that of the translation of the original rich, historical, symbolic language of the New Testament into the abstract, conceptual, logical, analytical language of rational thought. This development was, no doubt, necessary, and brought precision and clarity to reflection on the Christian revelation, but it also has grave limitations. It reduces the mystery of faith to an abstraction. To understand the mystery of Virgin Birth and Resurrection, of Trinity and Incarnation, we have constantly to go beyond the abstract language to the concrete symbols of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of the Messiah and the Kingdom and the Body of Christ. These give direct insight into the mystery of faith, while abstract terms give merely speculative knowledge. Both are necessary, but logical thought by itself is misleading.