Presuppositions and Silences: comments on a comment

Stephen Sykes

Professor Lash has done me such a generous turn in his lucid and penetrating review article on *The Identity of Christianity*[1] that it would be curmudgeonly to speak of this as a "reply"; let it stand rather as a response to those aspects of his properly critical remarks which provoke me.

The most galling of these is the "philosophical poverty" which he finds in certain crucial features of the argument. I am accused of neglecting the aid of Wittgenstein's "family resemblances" in speaking of Christianity as "one thing", and of Cartesian dualism because I distinguished between the outside and the inside of Christianity. There is, by now, a long tradition of Regius Professors whom Lash has charged with philosophical poverty, and it would be as well if this particular gripe were gripped firmly by the throat.

Karl Barth observed some long while ago that it was the easiest thing in the world to refute theological opponents by sniffing out their presumably erroneous *philosophical* presuppositions. Theological doctrines will inevitably remind the critical scholar of philosophical analogies, but we ought to have learnt, not least from a century or more of attempts to evaluate theologians such as Origen, of the need for very great care and precision. This is the case especially if we assume, with Whitehead, that Christianity is a religion *in search of* a metaphysic. Are we more certain that Wittgenstein can help us or that Descartes cannot, than we are that the Christian faith entails a commitment to unity or that there is something to be said about "the inner person" (*ho eso anthropos*)? Now it certainly is helpful when, as a result of exposure to philosophical argument, theologians become aware of unexamined intellectual commitments. The metaphorical character of Christian theology is always liable to lead to illicit assumptions. However, readers and potential readers of my book should be given notice that I am fully aware of this problem, indeed, that my discussion of the relation between the "inside" and the "outside" of Christianity in terms of the metaphors of foundation-superstructure, spirit-body and centre-circumference on pp. 236—8 is intended precisely as "an observation of the danger of the uncritical use of language" (p. 238).

Perhaps there is a kind of anterior commitment separating Lash

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and myself on this issue. A major difficulty for a systematician is the spread of disciplines with which he or she is supposed to be reasonably acquainted. But it has always seemed to me to be necessary to be prepared to take a position on the central questions of biblical study, as I argued at the beginning of the book. Do I perhaps here betray a characteristically Protestant concern? At least, it seems important for a person writing on the identity of a religion taking its name from Jesus called the Christ to have an informed sense of the shape of the original Christian movement. And this unquestionably involves taking sides, at second hand, on a large number of disputed issues. That is the unavoidable cost of taking the historical and the concrete with proper seriousness.

How then do matters stand in relation to the no less unavoidable requirement for reasonable philosophical competence? Lash expresses his personal dissatisfaction with an English tradition which has handed over doctrinal questions to the philosophers "preoccupied with formal and linguistic considerations". That such is not his own inclination is abundantly clear from his writings, which have a markedly hermeneutical interest. But, important though hermeneutics unquestionably is, and demanding though its philosophical conditions may be, it is a discipline dependent upon the existence of something to be interpreted. In its early sense hermeneutics was understood to be the principles of exegesis of the biblical text. Just as in Protestantism liberation from biblical literalism and the dogma of one verse, one vote, were achieved by developments in hermeneutical theory initiated by Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early nineteenth century, so many of the liberating developments of contemporary Roman Catholic theology have been made possible by advances in hermeneutics. The function and importance of hermeneutics is best understood when related to texts whose meaning has to be interpreted, but it is a discipline with omniverous tendencies. Lonergan deplored the fact that contemporary discussion of hermeneutics tended to treat problems in history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics and communications as though they were all hermeneutical issues.[2]

The hard questions which a contemporary theology has to face include the possibility that texts, even those reckoned in the past to be authoritative, may distort, misrepresent and even contradict the truth. Both Protestants and Catholics have to face this question, and, if I understand the implication of the Second Vatican Council's turning to the Bible aright, there was an implied willingness to enter the complex and uncertain world of biblical scholarship as partners in a common search for the foundations of the faith. And I take it to be both the importance and the offence of the recent writings of Eduard Schillebeeckx that he has firmly grasped the fact that the major challenges to contemporary theology lie in the interface between

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biblical criticism and the central doctrinal tradition of the Christian Churches, where the issues concerning the deity of Christ, the atonement, the nature of the sacraments and the Christian ministry are all unavoidably open to question.

The fundamental questions are not now, it seems, philosophical in the sense of hermeneutical. On each side of every controverted doctrinal issue there are to be found those with contradictory general philosophical inclinations. And unless it is now more important to the Church that one should be a critical realist, and not an idealist, rather than that one should confess the doctrine of the Trinity or the resurrection of Christ, then there exists a possible *apologia* for my undertaking. I even venture to add that, so far as I know, the issue concerning "Cartesian dualism" is unsettled, except by those who, like Gilbert Ryle, grossly oversimplify what Descartes actually said.

The second matter of real importance to which Lash attends is the relative failure of the book to sketch, even in outline, an understanding of the Church. Now I hope I may be forgiven for not writing about everything in Christianity, even in a book with the absurd title of *The Identity of Christianity*. But I certainly feel the force of the remark that an earthed ecclesiology is hardly present; indeed, from this quarter I had expected a severer lashing than I received. I have two remarks, the first of which is to plead relatively guilty. Nonetheless, the book is *not* an introduction to the whole of Christian doctrine, and I do *not* regard the doctrine of the Church as in any way specially privileged or foundational in the substance of Christianity. "The doctrine of the Church is not the central truth of Christianity" (Karl Rahner)[3]. Why then should Lash's criticism be permitted to stick, any more than one which might have observed my failure to deal with Christology?

Thus, I offer a second remark. I dare to think that one of the more original aspects of the book is its focus on the issue of power in the Church. This is no more than a resumption of a theme which very rightly concerned Max Weber's friend, the Protestant theologian (and friend of von Hügel), Ernst Troeltsch. Flawed though Troeltsch's sociological work undoubtedly is, his programme of interpreting Christian history in the closest possible relation to its social setting is one which I warmly support, as I do the recent developments in the sociological interpretation of the New Testament. Even now we are paying the severest price for the wholesale neglect of this enterprise in the dominantly biblical theology of the ecumenical movement with its naive distinctions between "the ideal" and "the actual". What the ecumenical movement needs is an open scrutiny of the actual possession and exercise of power in the Churches, to counterbalance all the honeyed words spoken about "service", and to give substance to the platitudinous repetition of generalisations about dispersed or

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centralized authority (generalisations to which I have, in my time, contributed).

In general, however, I accept the challenge that any model of conflict inside Christianity needs to be related to the conflicts of societies of which given Churches are part. The myth was that the world was diverse and chaotic, but Christianity united and purposeful. The truth as I have tried to depict it is that *because* the world is diverse, the only thing which keeps Christianity adequate to its ever-changing context is the vigour and realism (yes, and love) of its own internal dialectic, and that that dialectic is not in necessary contradiction to its sense of purpose, if only we learn now to persist in prayer with one another.

1   Nicholas Lash, "Argument, Essence and Identity", *New Blackfriars* Vol 65 pp. 413—419 (October 1984) on S. Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity*, SPCK London, 1984
2   B.J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London, 1971), p. 155.
3   *Foundations of Christian Faith* (London, 1978), p. 324.

Deity and Domination : II

David Nicholls

The concluding part of a paper presented at the International Symposium on Sociology and Theology, Oxford, January 1984. In the first part of this study of the relationship between the religious use of political images and concepts and their use in political rhetoric (published in January) the author focussed on the political and religious language of early seventeenth-century England.

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With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 a kind of stability returned to England; conflicts and controversies there, of course, were in the political sphere, and even a 'glorious revolution', but compared with the preceding decades a certain peace and order is evident. There was a strong desire for peace among various sections of the population, and the economic and social foundations were being established upon which was to rise the political stability of the following century. By 1688, writes J. Carswell, 'Englishmen were
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