

Why Should We Believe it?

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A contribution to the debate initiated by Michael Dummett in October 1987.

It is often said that Catholics believe in the development of doctrine. But it is not a doctrine of the Catholic Church that doctrine develops. The teaching of the Church is that its faith is immutable¹. The Church's primary attitude to doctrine is the principle given by St Paul. 'Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preach to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed' (Galatians 1:8). There is, of course, an obvious sense in which doctrine does develop. For the number of defined doctrines has grown over time. But the Catholic view of this is that doctrines defined over time are contained in or implied by what was taught from the beginning. The primary role of the Church as teacher is to preserve what has already been given and to state what that amounts to as need arises. It retains the Gospel and articulates it².

If that is what the Church does, it seems fair to ask why we should believe what the Church teaches. Some would dispute this on the ground that the Church in a sense does not teach. 'Why should we believe it?' presupposes that someone has propounded what he takes to be a truth. But, so it is sometimes said, the Church need not be concerned with propositions. This seems to be the view of Fr Bede Griffiths in 'A Symbolic Theology' (*New Blackfriars*, June 1988). Catholic faith, for him, should not be considered in terms of 'a propositional model of revelation' (p. 289). It has to do with assimilating 'the original rich, historical, symbolic language of the New Testament' (p. 294). It is concerned with 'meaning' rather than 'facts' (p. 291).

Fr Griffiths's understanding of 'symbolic', 'meaning' and 'facts' is not clear to me. But the truth in what he writes should not lead us to doubt that the teaching of the Church is irreducibly propositional in the sense that in teaching as it does the Church has always been teaching *that* something is true. Whatever else is to be said about them (e.g. that they are expressions of commitment) the creeds are in this sense propositional³. And if they are that, we are entitled to ask why we should believe them. When someone says 'I love you' the intention may not be to impart information. But it always makes sense to ask whether what the person says is true. By the same token, it always makes sense to ask whether what

the Church teaches is true. And if the Church says 'Yes' we are back to our original question. Why should we believe what the Church says? The Church, for example, says that Christ was God and that God is Trinity. But why should we believe such things?

So far as I can see, Fr Griffiths does not address himself to this question. But an answer might be traced in Fr Timothy Radcliffe's article 'Interrogating the Consensus: a response to Michael Dummett' (*New Blackfriars*, March 1988). Some would say that the Catholic faith hands on what Jesus taught. And if asked why they think this, the reply would be: 'Because the New Testament gives a true report of the teaching of Jesus'. But this is not quite Fr Radcliffe's line. He seems prepared to countenance a gap between the Gospels and the teachings of Jesus. 'As a Christian', he writes, 'I must believe the gospels. That is to say, I must accept them as true theological statements of the mystery of our salvation. But I am not therefore committed to saying that any single saying of Jesus that we find in the gospels exactly reports the words of that historical person. It could be, though it is extremely unlikely, 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. This would not matter since I believe in Pentecost and the Church, and so I can accept that these interpretations are true' (p. 118). Fr Radcliffe agrees that our faith in the Gospels could not be maintained if it were proved that Jesus 'was a completely different sort of person from the one we find described in the Gospels' (*ibid.*); so he is not saying that the Gospels must be believed regardless. Their historicity is in principle falsifiable. But he does seem to be saying that we may place our faith in what the evangelists teach rather than in the words of Christ which they claim to report.

This might seem an innocuous kind of conclusion, and one to which all modern Catholics should assent. After all, they believe in Pentecost and the Church. So why cannot they believe in Jesus as the Gospels present him? Are not the Gospels the fruit of Pentecost and the Church? To believe the Church is surely to believe them. But the Gospels make some pretty extraordinary claims. According to Fr Radcliffe, they tell us that Jesus was the Son of God and God with us (p. 120). They speak of him being God incarnate (p. 121). They view his death and resurrection as 'the conquest of sin and death and the triumph of the Father's love over sin and hatred' (p. 123). Suppose, then, we ask why we should believe in teachings such as these.

One possible answer is 'Because they are to be found in the Gospels'. But that is not an adequate answer to our question since it could be read as nothing more than a profession of faith in their truth, a repetition, if you like, of what the Church teaches. In view of what Fr Radcliffe writes, however, an alternative answer which suggests itself is that teachings such as those now in question commend themselves on historical grounds. If Fr

Radcliffe is content for the sake of argument to accept that the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels are always the result of redaction, he still seems to think that there is history in the Gospels. Speaking of the Resurrection, he says 'If the bones of Jesus lie undisturbed in Palestine, then the sort of event would not have occurred which would justify the theological claims made by the gospels' (p. 123). With reference to belief in Christ's divinity, he adds 'Jesus knew who he was in the sense that he called God his Abba, his Father. He believed himself to be utterly from and of the Father' (p. 124). Granted these premises, one might now be inclined to argue as follows: the Gospels record events which actually took place and words which actually were uttered which point in the direction of the view that Jesus was the Son of God. They are an intelligible basis from which to conclude that Jesus was God incarnate, that sin and death have been conquered, that the Father's love has triumphed, and so on.

But from where does someone who agrees with Fr Radcliffe obtain his information? The answer is obviously: 'From the Gospels'. But why should we believe that the Gospels are reliable on the matters of which Fr Radcliffe speaks? This, I think, is one of Professor Dummett's main worries in his article 'A Remarkable Consensus' (*New Blackfriars*, October 1987). For the moment, therefore, let me concentrate on Dummett, and, in doing so, let me focus on the following sentences from his article: 'If, in speaking of the Son of Man, Jesus was not referring to himself, then the Gospel accounts of his words are hopelessly garbled, and we cannot claim to know what he taught ... If he did not believe himself divine, then we have no ground to do so, and hence commit idolatry in praying to him; if he knew nothing of the Trinity, then we know nothing of the Trinity, and have no warrant whatever for supposing that there is a Trinity' (p. 430).

These remarks can evidently appear to people as a sequence of glaring non sequiturs (cf. Nicholas Lash, 'A Leaky Sort of Thing? The divisiveness of Michael Dummett', *New Blackfriars*, December 1987). In fact, however, Dummett is making some good points here. One of them is a simple one and is expressed by the first sentence quoted. The other is more complex and is, so I presume, expressed by the second sentence.

To grasp the first point, consider an analogy. 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? Evidence may suggest that Smith is sometimes capable of telling the truth. But, given what it now believes, the jury cannot claim to know that the rest of what Smith says is true. It might be true, for Smith

sometimes tells the truth. But the jury have now concluded that a substantial part of his testimony is untrue. It will therefore rightly and properly be directed to suspend judgement concerning the rest of his testimony.

If that is acceptable, then so is Dummett's comment on Jesus and the title 'Son of Man'. The Gospels repeatedly depict Jesus as referring to himself as the Son of Man. If we deny that he referred to himself in this way, then we also ought to doubt that they depict him correctly when they depict him as speaking in other ways. In saying this one would not be committed to holding that they always, or even often, give us the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. People who report what other people say rarely provide the equivalent of a stenographer's report. They leave words out. They paraphrase. They embellish. We know this very well, and judges and juries can presume on it.

Turning now to what I take to be Dummett's second point, consider the questions 'Can you show that someone is God incarnate?' and 'Can you show that God is Trinity?'. These are enormously difficult questions, but it is surely clear that nothing you can observe or record as historical data will entitle you to say that anyone is divine. If God is what Jews and Christians believe him to be (if he is at least the Maker of Heaven and Earth, omnipresent, all-knowing, almighty, and eternal), nothing we can observe or report as comprising the history of a human being could possibly warrant us in asserting that this human being is divine. In fact, the observable or reportable evidence will always conflict with this assertion. People manifestly do not make Heaven and Earth. They are manifestly not omnipresent, all-knowing, almighty or eternal. It might, of course, be said that someone could always do 'signs' and thereby give proof that he was divine. But what are we supposed to think of here? Let us say that Jones sometimes goes up to corpses and tells them to rise from the dead. The corpses 'revive' and everyone is delighted. Would this give us proof that Jones was divine? Of course it would not. If the power of life and death belongs to God, the most we have here is proof that God is at work. It would not prove that Jones is God. He need be nothing more than a 'secondary cause'. (No one asserts the divinity of Elijah and Elisha.) We would not even have proof that Jones was God should it transpire that Jones himself died and was subsequently identifiable as alive. (No one claims that Lazarus was God.) If we here take Jones to be God, that will be because we *believe* him to be God, not because we have anything entitling us to say that we know that he is God⁴.

What of the Trinity? Here I can only repeat what Aquinas argues on the subject, for it strikes me as sound and I know of no cogent objection to it. 'The truth that God is three and one', he says, 'is altogether a matter of faith; and in no way can it be demonstratively proved'⁵. Why? Because our knowledge of God is derived from creatures and what we can grasp of him

by reason is derived from this. Reason, says Aquinas, can indeed tell us that there is a God; but what we learn here is that there is a God who is the source of the existence of things. Reason tells us that God is the Creator. And yet, so Aquinas continues, the creative power of God, and all that we can know of God by reason, is something that belongs without differentiation to each of the divine persons. For each of them is wholly divine. Reason, then, can know of the existence of divinity, but not of any distinction of persons in divinity.⁶

An analogous argument is this. Suppose we discovered what is evidently an indication of intelligent life on some planet. We have no direct access to the cause or causes of what we discover; all we can observe is that intelligence has been at work. Can we now number the alien inhabitants of the planet? Clearly not. There might be a dozen of them, all very active and highly efficient. There might be a million of them (slightly less active and individually less efficient). Or there might be just one very active very efficient very powerful alien. By the same token, so Aquinas is suggesting, we know that the world is created, but we are in no position by reason alone to fill in the details of number. We can know that divinity is not multipliable; so there cannot be two Gods. But we cannot say that in divinity itself there is anything which can be numbered⁷.

With all that behind us, let us now return to the person who accepts Fr Radcliffe's premises. He believes that at least some historical happenings are recorded by the Gospels—that the bones of Jesus are not in a tomb (that Jesus is raised from the dead in a way that somehow includes this fact), and that Jesus called God 'Abba', and believed that he was 'utterly from and of the Father'. What else must this person now believe?

Must he believe that Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man? It seems to me that the answer here is 'Yes'. If we believe the Gospels in their claim that Jesus was raised from the dead (in the above sense) and if we also believe that they misreport in saying that he called himself the Son of Man, then we are like jurors who accept that, though Smith spoke falsely in saying that Jones called himself the man sent to read the meter, they can believe other things he said.

But must the person we are now talking about not believe a bit more than this? Once again, the answer is surely 'Yes'. He need not believe that the Gospels deliver the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, but he must believe that they give a substantially accurate report of what he said. For let us suppose he holds that while they are right in saying that Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, they are elsewhere substantially wrong in what they report him as saying. Then he ought not to believe that Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man.

I take it, then, that someone accepting Fr Radcliffe's premises will reasonably seek to gloss the assertion (should anyone make it) that 'in every instance' the sayings of Jesus 'have been redacted'. If this means that

the sayings of Jesus found in the Gospels do not reflect the substance of what he said, he will deny it.

There is also something else he can deny. This is that he has good reason to believe in the divinity of Christ by virtue of the fact that Jesus called God 'Abba' and 'believed himself to be utterly from and of the Father'. If what I argued above has any cogency, a man can call God 'Abba' until he is blue in the face. And he can be convinced of anything you please. But none of this entitles us to conclude that he is God⁸.

Nor does it entitle us to conclude that God is Trinity. Fr Radcliffe does not say anything about the Trinity; but let us suppose that someone is interested in this and wonders what could justify him in stating that God is Trinity. For the reasons given by Aquinas, it cannot be any historical fact. In 'A Leaky Sort of Thing', Professor Lash says that 'The doctrine of the Trinity is the fruit of Christian reflection, guided (we believe) by God's Spirit, on who he was who was born and died for us' (p. 556). But what on earth could entitle us to believe that Christian reflection has been guided into truth if what it concludes is that God is Trinity? We may believe that God is Trinity. We may believe that God has guided us to believe this. But 'reflection' cannot assure us that we are right. Here we need more than 'reflection'. More precisely, 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.

At this point I am reminded of two other arguments of Dummett. In 'Unsafe Premises: a reply to Nicholas Lash' (*New Blackfriars*, December 1987), he says: 'Unless we suppose that he (sc. Jesus) knew that he was God' we have 'no reason to accept' what Nicea and Chalcedon taught about him (p. 562). Also in 'Unsafe Premises' he says: 'We could have no valid ground for believing so extraordinary a doctrine as the Trinity, let alone making it an integral part of Christian teaching, unless Jesus knew that fact concerning God and said enough for us to come to understand his as communicating it' (p. 563). All of this seems to me to be true. If the doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity need to be revealed, they must come from God who must tell us enough for us to be able to formulate them. How could he do this? Since here we are concerned with being told, then I presume (maybe quite naively) that we have to receive verbal communication from someone who knows what he is talking about. Some identifiable person speaking from knowledge has to tell us enough for us to say that Christ is God and that God is Trinity. In fact, some identifiable divine person speaking from knowledge has to tell us this.

It might be said that there are more ways than one of being told things and that people can learn of the Incarnation and Trinity though no divine person informs them of such matters—where 'informs' means what it does in sentences like 'The doctor informed Smith that he had cancer'. But what would we be thinking of here? As far as I can see we would have to

suppose that reason can somehow establish the doctrines now in question. But that seems not to be so. No purely rational argument will show that anyone is divine or that God is Trinity. Following the lead of Professor Lash, someone might reply that Jesus, though he did not know of the Incarnation and Trinity, could say enough to warrant us believing in them. But this is a grossly implausible view. As I have already suggested, the story of Jesus, however we reconstruct it, does not warrant calling him divine. And even if we suppose that Jesus explicitly taught the doctrine of the Trinity, it still would not follow that God is indeed Trinity. We would only be obliged to conclude that God is this if we also believe that in saying what he does Jesus here speaks from knowledge.

I take it, then, that if we are to say that Christ was God and that God is Trinity, we need to be sufficiently informed by one who is God and by one who knows what he is talking about. And this I take to mean that, in a perfectly ordinary everyday sense, somebody has to tell us something. In that case, however, we are back to the problem of history and the Gospels. We are entitled to believe that Christ was God and that God is Trinity if someone speaking from knowledge has said enough to allow us to conclude to the truth of this belief. Given that the doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity somehow derive from the words of Jesus, it will follow that we are left in the dark concerning them unless we have substantial access to these words. And Catholics, who believe in the Incarnation and the Trinity, have grave cause to be worried should it be said that the Gospels do not give us a substantially true account of what Jesus said⁹.

But now suppose that this is said and that people who say it purport to have proof that what they say is true. What should a Catholic's reaction be? What should my reaction be?

I could, of course, agree. And, so far as anything I am here arguing goes, I could be right. Whether right or wrong, however, I am in a difficult position. If I believe that the Gospels do not give a substantially true account of what Jesus said, I have no warrant for believing what I am supposed to believe as a Catholic—viz. that Christ was God and that God is Trinity. I may continue to believe this, but I have no adequate answer should someone ask why it should be believed. I will have to content myself with a profession of faith.

There is, however, another way of proceeding. I might deny that anyone can show that the Gospels do not give us a substantially accurate account of the words of Jesus.

But here we encounter further problems. Surely, it might be said, matters of history cannot be settled *a priori*. How can I claim to know in advance that nobody has shown that the Gospels do not give us a substantially accurate account of the words of Jesus? Must I not here consult the historical evidence? Must I not engage with the work of

Biblical exegetes? Must I not study the arguments of those who disagree with me, and, if they are probative, must I not accept them?

If they are probative, then indeed I should accept them. And that, so I am arguing, will give me good reason to leave the Church. But I am not rationally obliged to think that anyone has proved that the Gospels do not give us a substantially accurate account of the words of Jesus. And I can suppose that the Gospels do give us this without engaging with the arguments of those who think otherwise.

Here, once again, it seems to me that Dummett has made an important point. In 'Theology and Reason' (*New Blackfriars*, May 1988) he notes that the conclusions of Biblical exegetes are based on the assessment of probabilities. I presume that this is so. At any rate, I don't know of an exegete who denies it, it coheres perfectly with the account of Biblical scholarship given by Fr Radcliffe, and the continuing industry of Biblical criticism points heavily in its favour. As Dummett goes on to say, however, the fact has important consequences. For 'when probabilities are up for assessment, anyone is entitled, indeed required, to take into account any belief he has that bears on the degree of probability' (p. 241).

This principle is surely a sound one. Suppose I am given evidence which, considered on its own, makes it highly probable that Jones committed a murder. Let us also suppose that I believe Jones to be a gentle and kind man, someone who regularly goes out of his way to help people, someone who has grieved over murder and lamented it. In that case, I have good reason to oppose his detractors and I cannot agree with them without abandoning my beliefs. If I decline to abandon them I cannot conclude that Jones committed the crime. Applied to the question of the Bible and exegesis, the moral would seem to be this: warranted belief in the Incarnation and the Trinity commits a rational person to denying in advance that the Gospels do not give us a substantially true account of the words of Jesus. Someone who thinks that he has such warranted belief is actually obliged to hold that the Gospels give us a substantially true account of the words of Jesus.

He can always concede that he lacks such warranted belief. He can deny that Jesus was God and so on. Alternatively, he can continue to make professions of faith while unable to say why he should believe what he does. But if he thinks that his faith is warranted, he will have to deny that evidence exists to show that the Gospels as we have them do not give an accurate account of the words of Jesus. This would not commit him to saying that they yield his *ipsissima verba*. Nor need it lead him to denying that there is much creative theological activity on the part of the evangelists. Thus, for example, he is perfectly entitled to agree with Pius XII and his call to scholars to study biblical texts from a linguistic and historical viewpoint, thereby promoting a 'knowledge and careful appreciation of ancient modes of expression and literary forms and styles'

(*Divino Afflante Spiritu*). From what I am arguing there is no mandate entailed for what might be called 'traditional Biblical Fundamentalism'. As Hugo Meynell observes: 'It is one thing to insist on historical accuracy in every detail, another to insist on substantial historicity'¹⁰. All that follows is that we cannot claim warranted belief in certain central Christian doctrines while also being prepared to countenance a high degree of scepticism concerning the Gospels' historicity.

This thesis is hardly original. It has been going around for centuries. Ancient presumptions sometimes need to be repeated, however. My excuse for rehearsing this one is that it bears strongly on the debate on which I am commenting and it seems central to Catholic Christianity. According to Vatican I, 'The doctrine of faith which God has revealed is not, like a philosophical theory, something for human ingenuity to perfect; but rather divine deposit from Christ to his bride, to be faithfully preserved and infallibly explained'. If that teaching does not suppose that the essence of Christianity has been given to us in history by the teaching of one who, as God, could authoritatively say what nobody else could, then black is white and 2 and 2 make 10.

- 1 The point is properly emphasized and documented by Anthony Kenny in 'The Development of Ecclesiastical Doctrine' (*Reason and Religion*, Oxford, 1987).
- 2 See the texts collected in Karl Rahner S.J. (ed.), *The Teaching of the Catholic Church* (New York, 1967), pp. 56–84.
- 3 Cf. P.T. Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 37.
- 4 In saying all this I am, of course, presuming that 'Christ is God' is either true or false and that it means that 'Christ is all that God is', not that it means what it does in what are often called 'reductionist' Christologies.
- 5 *In Boeth. de Trin.*, 3,4.
- 6 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia,32,1 and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1,9.
- 7 I recognise that the analogy I am drawing here is imperfect. Aquinas does not think of the persons of the Trinity as three individuals sharing a nature—as a given number of aliens might share a nature. The one God, for him, is what the three persons are.
- 8 One may, in any case, take leave to doubt that, even if he did call God 'Abba', Jesus should be taken to be expressing any special connection between himself and God. See James Barr, ' "Abba" isn't "Daddy" ', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 39 (1988) and ' "Abba, Father" and the Familiarity of Jesus' Speech', *Theology XCI* (1988). If Professor Barr is right, Fr Radcliffe's comments on how Christ 'laid hold of his identity' (p. 124) need qualifying.
- 9 To suppose that Jesus, speaking from knowledge, said enough to warrant us proclaiming that God is Trinity does not, of course, commit one to holding that Jesus uttered the language of Nicea and Chalcedon or an Aramaic translation of that. In 'A Leaky Sort of Thing', Professor Lash suggests otherwise (p. 556), as does Joseph Fitzpatrick in 'Lonergan's Method and the Dummett-Lash Dispute' (*New Blackfriars*, March, 1988, p. 136). All it commits one to, however, is the belief that the language of Nicea and Chalcedon is a legitimate way of expressing what Jesus taught. It might be replied that knowledge of the Triune God depends on knowing the formulae of Nicea and Chalcedon. But that is false. God from eternity knows himself to be Trinity. But he does not need to know the formulae of Nicea and Chalcedon. If he had not created, there would be no such formulae for him to know.
- 10 'Faith, Objectivity and Historical Falsifiability' in Brian Davies O.P., ed., *Language, Meaning and God* (London, 1987), p. 149.