New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Michael Dummett in memoriam*

Sir Michael Dummett died on 27 December 2011 aged 86. As the obituaries demonstrated, he was greatly respected and loved: a devoted family man, with seven children, two of whom predeceased him; the most eminent Oxford philosopher of his generation; and an early campaigner (with his wife Ann*) against British immigration policies. His undergraduate studies were interrupted by service in the Royal Artillery and then the Intelligence Corps, in India and Malaya, where he first saw racism in the raw. A Dominican at the University of Edinburgh chaplaincy received him into the Catholic Church in 1944. He succeeded A.J. Ayer in 1979 as professor of logic at Oxford. He was knighted in 1999.

With J.M. Cameron, Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach, and Brian McGuinness, among others, Dummett took part in the 1950s and '60s in the conferences held under Dominican auspices at Spode House that brought together seminary professors of neoscholastic philosophy and the new generation of Catholics teaching analytic philosophy in the universities.

Great philosophers often have one simple question. For Dummett, the question was how we can grasp the meaning of a sentence if we have no way of telling what it is for it to be true. In the Gifford Lectures at St Andrews in 1996, finally published in 2006 as *Thought and Reality*, he argued once again that we should relinquish the idea that we know what it is for a proposition to be true independently of our having any means of recognizing its truth, — on this occasion, however, he concluded with a somewhat Berkeleian argument for the existence of a being whose comprehension has no limits, whose knowledge of how things are is what constitutes their being that way.

Dummett first appeared in this journal with his robust defence of 'Oxford philosophy' in his wholly destructive review of Ernst Gellner's book *Words and Things* (March 1960, reprinted in *Truth and other enigmas*, 1978). With an approving preface by Bertrand Russell, Gellner's book denounces 'linguistic philosophy', instantiated by J.L. Austin and the later Wittgenstein, as systematic evasion of the great metaphysical questions, 'talk about talk', mere lexicography, etc. Brought from Prague as a schoolboy, Gellner (1925–1995) also had his philosophical studies at Oxford interrupted by war service (in the Czechoslovakian Armoured Brigade in France). He too

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graduated brilliantly, with the John Locke Prize; but by 1949, at the London School of Economics, he was at most the supernumerary philosopher in a great sociology department. Whatever he believed, he wrote the book as a sociologist, not as a philosopher. A *Times* leader and weeks of controversy on the letters page gained it notoriety. As Dummett concludes, 'it is a depressing illustration of the philistinism of what [Gellner] calls the 'general educated public' in this country that they could be deceived by a book which does not even have the smell of honest or seriously intentioned work'. (Despite Dummett's defence of 'Oxford philosophy', the same dismissive attitude as Gellner's is easy enough to find, among people with no knowledge of his book, more than half a century later.)

As a Catholic Michael Dummett had a question: 'Nothing is more important than that Catholics should continually ask themselves: how bad a state is the Church in?' ('How Corrupt is the Church?', August 1965). He deplores the way that 'progressives' and 'conservatives' were demonizing one another, with respect specifically to the vernacular in the liturgy. Then he worries about 'the aggrandisement of the bishops': collegiality is a welcome idea but bishops have always tended to become dictators, and now 'papal protection . . . will be much harder to come by, because the Vatican will henceforth be far more chary of interfering with the independence of bishops'. On moral issues, he fears that the Council will fudge the question of contraception, and conclude without condemning nuclear weapons. More radically, he judges that we Catholics have a tendency 'to attempt to put things right without facing squarely the fact that they were wrong': in particular, good as it is for the Council to repudiate anti-Semitism, the problem remains of 'uprooting the anti-Semitism that is the direct result of the Church's teaching of Christ's Gospel'. We need to understand 'from what diseased cell in the flesh of Christ's Bride this cancerous growth can have developed'. Deeper than all these matters, however, the 'glaring reason' for assuming the Church to be 'corrupt' is her failure in face of the 'Satanic outbreak' of Hitler's Germany and the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 'the other great moral evil of our time'. Finally, while we have come to understand that the Mass is the supreme act of a community, the fact is that what is symbolized in this corporate act simply does not exist in reality — 'The Church is at present merely a religious association: an organization to which those can belong who accept certain religious views, which exists solely to supply to its members what will fulfil their strictly religious needs. We do not know one another, we do not care for one another, and we have nothing in common with one another save our acceptance of certain religious tenets'.

Strong stuff! In a corrective footnote the editor (Herbert McCabe) notes the repeated condemnation by Pope Pius XII of nuclear weapons. Of course Dummett was writing before Vatican II

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concluded: not everything turned out as he feared — like 'the independence of the bishops!'

As a result of the editorial (February 1967) arguing that, though the Church is indeed 'corrupt', this is no reason to leave, as Fr Charles Davis had decided to do, Fr Herbert was famously removed from the editorship. Several reactions ensued: G.P. Dwyer, Archbishop of Birmingham (March); Cornelius Ernst (April); John Bryden (May); and then Michael Dummett (June): 'What is Corruption?' — seeking to clarify the notion in relation to the Catholic Church, since it was he who introduced it in this journal. We might note in passing that McCabe's examples of alleged corruption in the Church were far less dire than Dummett's. He offered no further examples of corruption among us now but sought instead to draw on history to document a principle: 'The point I want to establish is that if loyalty to holy Church is taken to mean that we deny that such corruption can be present, or that it can now be present, then we expose ourselves to the utmost danger of betraying the Son of Man with a kiss'.

Michael Dummett remained troubled by the question of contraception. In 'The Documents of the Papal Commission on Birth Control' (February 1969) he subjected the 'minority' and the 'majority' reports to thorough analysis: the minority argue better though their conclusion is wrong, he is more sympathetic to the majority's desire for change but regards their arguments as poorly conducted. In 'Enforcing the Encyclical' (May 1970), he argued that, by treating the question as one that demanded prolonged investigation, the Pope and the Council enabled Catholics in good faith to decide that the traditional teaching did not have the required guarantee of certainty, such that 'justice demands that their consciences be respected'. In his last book, *The Nature and Future of Philosophy* (2010), he discusses philosophy in relation to science, religion, morality, language, and meaning, in the light of what he regards as a 'crisis' in philosophical practice. Most of his readers will presumably find this somewhat bewildering but he returns to examples of corruption in the Catholic Church and even includes four pages (51–53) deploring the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and asking for 'some rethinking about the blanket condemnation of contraceptives, including condoms'. It seems likely that he had not caught up with the condemnation of contraception in the light of the late Pope John Paul II's 'theology of the body'.

It should come as no surprise that the longest and most passionate controversy in this journal was set off by Michael Dummett: 'A Remarkable Consensus' (October 1987) opens by identifying triumphalism and papal monarchism as continuing obstacles to reunion with the Orthodox but spreads into an alarming and even alarmist account of the 'liberal consensus', the 'Liberal Protestantism', the 'doctrinal revisionism', allegedly prevalent among professors of Catholic

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theology. The basis for this accusation was a long review by Thomas Sheehan in *The New York Review of Books* (14 June 1984) of a book by Hans Küng. This wholesale condemnation of current Catholic theology gave rise to protest and further polemics, with articles by Nicholas Lash, Joseph Fitzpatrick, Brian Davies, Eamon Duffy, Timothy Radcliffe, two more by Dummett himself — all finally brought to a stop irenically and magisterially by Radcliffe (April 1989), then convener of the editorial board.

There are several other interventions in this journal, always thought provoking. 'Colour and Citizenship: The Rose Report' (January 1970), for instance, displays Michael Dummett's concern with racism. Nor is this the only journal in which polemics appeared about internal Catholic matters — in 'The Revision of the Roman Liturgy' (*Adoremus Bulletin*, March 1997) he wants the 'tin-eared' ICEL translators dismissed — although, interestingly, his ire is concentrated principally on the revision of the Divine Office: 'The new petitions substituted for the old *Preces* are couched in an embarrassingly cosy diction quite lacking in dignity. The Council Fathers committed an act of philistinism in abolishing Prime; Compline has been butchered. These were perfect forms of morning and evening prayer; the loss of the one and mutilation of the other is a calamity'.

Few have ever combined unwavering loyalty to the Church with such relentless interrogation.

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*Ann Dummett died on 7 February 2012.

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