THE PAST OF BELIEF: REFLECTIONS OF A HISTORIAN OF DOCTRINE ON DEWART'S *THE FUTURE OF BELIEF*

Although Leslie Dewart's *The Future of Belief* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966) is an essay about the future addressed by a philosopher to theologians, it embodies certain judgments about the past which seem to call for reaction from a historian of Christian doctrine. For while "the retelling of the whole history of Christian dogma from the apostolic age until our own day" (p. 132) is not its purpose, it does purport to be based on "the conclusion[s] of historical research." At least three of these conclusions seem to require comment.

THE HELLENIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY

Prof. Dewart explicitly dissociates his interpretation of "hellenism" from that of Harnack (p. 133), on the grounds that Harnack thought of the process of hellenization as a corruption, while Dewart thinks of it as a stage of development once useful but no longer relevant. Thus he calls for "dehellenization of dogma, and specifically that of the Christian doctrine of God" as his program (p. 49). What is the specific content of this hellenism? It seems to include such notions as "the hellenic principle that man's perfection *is* happiness" (p. 32), "the hellenic philosophical viewpoint" which equates "intelligibility and necessity" (p. 44, n. 38), "a hellenic idea that development must be reducible to becoming" (p. 44), "the presumed Truth of God's self-identity, which is a hellenization of the Christian experience" (p. 74). This "hellenization of Christian philosophical speculation . . . [constitutes], in point of historical fact, the condition of the possibility of modern atheism" (p. 153). Applied to the doctrine of God, hellenism brought it about that God was "fittingly conceived as a suprarational person" (p. 187), and it was in this way responsible for the doctrine of the Trinity. Summarizing his interpretation of this history, Dewart states (p. 136):

> But it would be unhistorical to suppose that at the first moment of the development of the Christian consciousness this consciousness could have created the concepts whereby to elaborate itself—it is not until our own day that such a possibility has begun to emerge. At the time, all it could possibly have done was to use the concepts of which it was *already* possessed. The intellectual effort of the early centuries was, therefore, predominantly directed to the adaptation of hellenic conceptions to serve the development of dogma—that is, to the casting of Christianity in hellenic forms.

Even apart from the condescending tone of this paragraph (of which

more a little later), it seems to rest on a partial and distorted reading of "the intellectual effort of the early centuries." It is instructive, for example, to study the development of Christian doctrine in a cultural and intellectual ambience that was decidedly nonhellenic—the Syriac. The description of the relation between Jesus and God in the theological tractates (or "homilies") of Aphrahat—which can be studied even by someone who does not read Syriac, thanks to the translation of Fr. Parisot and the monograph of Fr. Urbina—shows a Christology that is quite orthodox according to the standards of fourth-century Christian "hellenism," but that is not obliged to resort to the technical terminology which Dewart finds to be so dated. And *pace* Dewart's disclaimers, the language of Aphrahat, even in its unabashedly "mythological" cast, speaks with a directness to which the present-day reader may sometimes resonate more readily than he does to "hellenic" language. But that assumes that the language of orthodox dogma is in fact hellenic. Thus Dewart presents his version of the history of the Christian notion of *logos* (pp. 139–41) without referring either to its absence from the Nicene Creed (whose use of the name "light" for God has, he claims, "lost its meaningfulness . . . completely" [p. 214]) or to its relations with the *chokhmah* of Proverbs 8. As the history not only of *logos* but of all the major terms (including and especially *phōs ek phōtos*, as I have argued elsewhere) demonstrates, the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas were as much a fundamental refutation of hellenism as they were some sort of "adaptation of hellenic concepts." Failure to observe the nuances of his history leads the author to the amazing historical postulate of a "hellenism in which *natura*, *substantia* and *persona* were realities of common experience" (p. 146). Such a refusal to take history seriously is "hellenic" if anything is.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOGMA

A large part of *The Future of Belief* is given over to an examination of the problem of doctrinal development. Dewart suggests "that loyalty to the Catholic Church would be best safeguarded . . . by a theory of development that would integrate contemporary experience and faith" (p. 90), a theory that would "account not only for the possibility of *ontogenetic* but also *phylogenetic* development" (p. 97). He believes that both the discovery of organic evolution and the contemporary understanding of the nature of consciousness make possible a theory of the development of dogma in which authentic change and novelty can be acknowledged, and he sees this possibility as a uniquely modern discovery. "Of course," he writes,

"the idea that . . . orthodoxy *requires* the development of dogma, has not occurred to the Christian mind until recent times" (p. 150).

Just what Dewart means by "recent times" in this context becomes explicit in a historical judgment that occurs at least twice in the course of his argument. He claims to be able to discern historically "Christianity's conscious decision, especially since the end of the eighteenth century, to avoid developing dogma as far as possible" (p. 108). Somewhat later he expands this thesis and speaks of "a policy which Christianity unconsciously began to develop at some time between the days of patristic hellenism and the age of medieval Scholasticism, and which had been implicitly espoused since the beginning of the sixteenth century and consciously abided by since the end of the eighteenth" (p. 172). It would seem, then, that there has been a development not only of dogma but also of resistance to the idea of development: from the unconscious to the implicit to the conscious. Elsewhere we are told of "a partly conscious, partly unconscious, commitment to a supposedly final conceptualization" (p. 135). There is an intriguing analogy between this theory about the development of hostility to development and the very theory about development of dogma which Dewart excoriates. To a historian of doctrine who is not a Roman Catholic, moreover, there is some irony in the designation of the end of the eighteenth century as the point when Christianity (=Roman Catholicism) consciously decided to avoid developing dogma; for 1854, 1870, and 1950 are the specific points at which the development of dogma was not only acknowledged *de facto* but promulgated *de jure*. It is significant in this connection that Marian doctrine, which has become the *cause célèbre* of the problem of development of dogma, especially since *Munificentissimus Deus*, is mentioned, as far as I can tell, only once in the entire book, and then in a brief footnote (p. 199, n. 25). The earlier *cause célèbre* of development of dogma, which played a role in relations with the East somewhat similar to that played by Mariology in relations with Protestantism, was the Double Procession; this, too, is disposed of in a footnote: "And, to be sure, *filioque*" (p. 142, n. 18). But since these developments of dogma helped to precipitate schism between churches rather than between the churches and "a world come of age," they appear to be irrelevant to the central thesis.

For underlying the historical judgments about development of dogma appears to be an even more basic historical judgment: "It is not until our own day that such a possibility [for Christian consciousness to create the concepts whereby to elaborate itself] has begun to emerge" (p. 136). This helps to explain a parenthetical remark near the beginning of the book about "the contemporary world, which is the only real one" (p. 16). The

charges of "undevelopment" and the calls for further development are based on the assumption that past developments represented an accommodation to their times, such that "*natura, substantia* and *persona* were realities of common experience" in "hellenism" (p. 146), and on the assumption that the adult world of the twentieth century demands a development of dogma that will catch up with its maturity. But if the underlying problem is an understanding of Christian doctrine that has absolutized the past, or, in the language of Dewart's article in *America* (Dec. 17, 1966), "loved the past too long," is it really much of an improvement to absolutize the present moment instead? For as there are aspects of revelation which Christians today find *simpático* and others from which they feel alienated, so previous ages in the history of the Church have had to struggle to come to terms with the whole of Christian truth, boggling at some of the very things which have assumed such importance for believers today. The development of Christian doctrine has not been a unilinear progress, but has been characterized by an openness simultaneously to the past and to the present, while heresy has attempted either to absolutize a particular stage in the development (so Semi-Arianism in relation to Nicaea) or to sacrifice continuity to relevance (so Modernism).

THE CRISIS OF CONTINUITY

Near the end of his book Dewart refers to the "crisis of authority" (p. 204), suggesting that it "may be at bottom the crisis of absolute theism"; and he contemplates rather dispassionately "the eventual disappearance of Christianity in the form in which we have known it since primitive times." Thus it would seem that the deeper crisis is a crisis of continuity; for if "the form" (singular, with definite article) of Christianity "since primitive times" is to disappear, all previous discontinuities—between the apocalyptic and the institutional, between *geistliche Vollmacht* and *kirchliches Amt*, between Jewish and non-Jewish observance, *et illud omne genus*—seem together to constitute "the form." The author does refer to "the faithful continuity of the truth of [Christian] doctrine" (p. 109). He is sure that "continuity in truth requires the continuity of God's self-communication to man, and the continuity of man's correlative religious experience in response to God's initiative" (p. 114).

Yet when the book gets down to specifying what it means by continuity, the picture becomes rather different. The cool acceptance of discontinuity in church dogma is matched by the assumption that "Judaeo-Christianity is in uninterrupted temporal and cultural continuity with the history of man"(p. 123); likewise, authentic faith takes place in "the continuity of

achieving-belief and achieved-belief" (p. 65). Therefore, Tillich's reference to "the classical theology of all centuries" is repeated several times (pp. 38, 39, 40, 48) in a polemic against his failure to be as radical in his reinterpretation of the doctrine of God as he was in his use of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The historical assumption behind such discussions as these seems simultaneously to exaggerate and to minimize the continuity in the history of Christian doctrine: to exaggerate it, because despite an oblique reference to Theodore of Mopsuestia (p. 150), it ignores the variations within patristic doctrine or, for that matter, within medieval doctrine as represented by the Victorines, Scotus, or Cusanus; to minimize it, because despite the reiteration of the word "belief," it is with concepts and theories, not with beliefs and practices, that the author is chiefly concerned. Worship is referred to occasionally, as in the suggestion "that the Christian theism of the future might so conceive God as to find it possible to look back with amusement on the day when it was thought particularly appropriate that the believer should bend his knee in order to worship God" (p. 204). As nearly as I can tell, there is no explicit reference to prayer. Yet certainly one defensible definition of "Christian theism" would be: an attempt to give an account in concepts of the belief at work in the Christian practice of prayer. The practice of prayer has undoubtedly fluctuated in the history of the Church, as it does in the history of every Christian. But in the light of Prof. Dewart's rejection of "the distinction between language and thought" (p. 104), is there not some massive continuity in the daily repetition of the Our Father "since primitive times"? To coin a phrase, *securus judicat orbis terrarum.* Again, is the continuity in the celebration of the Eucharist, in the administration of baptism, in the preaching, teaching, and reading of Scripture, in obedience to the gospel purely formal and external? Even on Dewart's own terms, it cannot be.

A colleague used to say that present-day seminarians "don't know just what it is they ought to have such difficulty believing." Precisely because I am, if anything, more radical than Dewart in my concern for "the future of belief" even though I am considerably less sanguine than he about "a world come of age," I wish that there were less oversimplification and caricature in his description of the past of belief. For I suspect he might find in that past some of the very resources he seeks. The questions might become more complex, but the answers more profound.

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