

Dewart

and the Future of Belief

by David Thomasma, O.P.

A Dominican responds to the call for de-Hellinization

The three "R's!" But not reading, writing, and 'rithmetic in this instance. Instead the publication of Leslie Dewart's *The Future of Belief* was a different case of three "R's." It was the *right* book at the *right* time by the *right* author.

It was the right book because it represents an attempted setting of the problem, like a cut stone, in a ring which could be initially worn by all. The problem is indicated by the title . . . the future of belief. And all of us are concerned enough about our faith to try his ring on our finger, to approach the problem by way of his synthesis of it.

The book was written at the right time. Hardly "the book of the century" as some enthusiasts claim, and hardly on a par with the publications of Descartes as others have urged, his book nevertheless expresses the unrest and dissatisfaction of the faith-consciousness of the Church over its traditional formulations. Above all, about its formulae on God. Dewart argues that such formulae lie at the core of the Christian's contemporary hesitation about his own faith. His suggestion is that these formulae be rethought in accord with contemporary experience. That they must be is not only evidenced by the popularity of the book, but also by the urgings of Vatican II to adapt to our times.

And Dewart is the right author. He is not a brilliant philosopher. Next to contemporaries such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein, Dewart appears a mental midget. But so do we all! He is not a profound theologian. Rahner, Schillebeeckx, Congar and Longergan all pale his star on the horizon. In fact, he is not a careful scholar. His book abounds in over-hasty generalizations about the whole of Greek and western culture, and in confused and constantly shifting terminology. One acquainted with a deeper study of the ideas collected in his book is faced with constant frustration.

Yet we may still ascribe to him the title: the right author. Why? Precisely because he recognizes his own limitations. Recognizing these, he nevertheless wrote a book which more competent men have failed to produce for our guidance. In this book he never presents his own thinking as the last word. The sense of a beginning, of setting out on a long trek, is the overall impression derived from his work. As we gather momentum during the journey through the book, his suggestions amount to tossing off some of the heavy baggage which encumbers us. And the heavy baggage is the cultural baggage which impedes the acceptance of faith in Christ in our day.

What is Dewart's thesis? Basically it is this: that the Church must rethink its formulations, taking into effect the evolved human and cultural situation. Since this is exactly what the Church has done throughout the centuries, although often after much needed prodding by councils and great men, Dewart's thesis is not at all astounding. But the "revolutionary" character of his thought, largely overrated and overdramatized, is neither his concern nor ours. Rather the finger he wishes to point clearly aims in another direction. His concern is that the Church in our day has *not* achieved its adaptation as it has done in the past. Even when some attempts are made to "adapt," they are insufficient. They are insufficient for this reason: that they are a re-hash rather than a profound re-thinking. What the Canadian thinker wishes undertaken is a deeply-rooted re-thinking of the faith of the Church as it partakes in the contemporary level of changing human experience.

Accepting human experience as a given means today accepting the evolution of all levels of human experience, whether they be in the realm of thought, culture, or faith. Because human nature is evolving, man's thinking and acting have also evolved. However, by "evolving" we do not mean "leaping." Dewart definitely wishes to preserve a link

with men of the past and their own interpretations of their experience. This is especially important in matters of developing dogma. For the original experience of the Church, set down in the Scriptures, holds a special, albeit enculturated place of honor in our life of faith. We are forced to rethink by our own experience and culture. But we are also forced to review historical developments of our own faith by the special import of Sacred Scriptures of the past.

Sandwiched between the reasons why the Church must rethink its formulations and the latter part of the book which contains suggestions about what should be adapted, is the all-important core: the chapter on the development of dogma. This chapter is a try at explaining *how* these changes might be justified. And it is a courageous try. Nevertheless it is at this core that Dewart's proposal for a new consciousness of the Church comes to a grinding halt.

The reason for this failure is simple. The proposed explanation of the development of doctrine actually amounts to a justification for even complete jumps and transitions, total reversals of doctrinal teaching. One gets the impression from this section that the Church can totally *create* new doctrines from out of its own faith-consciousness. Obviously this is not what Dewart wants to hold.

Coupled with the confusion caused by such a failure is another overall impression in the book that whatever is Greek or ancient is puerile today while whatever "modern man" expresses is correct. This is to a large extent true. But to universalize its extension is to invite trouble. Often enough, Dewart seems to "correct" hypotheses or explanations of the past merely on the strength that they come from the past cultures and are no longer relevant. One wishes he were more careful to inquire whether in fact they may be viable answers notwithstanding. The most magnificent insight St. Thomas had was that all of his work was as so much straw! But straw is hard to come by. It takes work to gather it. We have a hard time getting whatever we can by way of explanation, from whatever source. Care must be taken before we toss out what we have assembled. Only then can be sought a vision of so great meaning, that what we have produced becomes a stiff, yellow, lifeless strand of straw!

Consequently, the reader is prone to misunderstand Dewart's true position. The ambiguities in his writing and argumentation lead us to this misunderstanding. Rather than say that man has leaped in his development to a totally new and "higher" realm of consciousness,

Dewart only intends to point to the obvious fact that human experience and culture are evolving. In the light of our own agreement with his proposed thorough re-thinking of our formulations about God in terms of contemporary experience, and of the means to take in this re-thinking, we would suggest the following emendations in his approach.

First of all, some clarification should be demanded of Dewart on the issue of "de-Hellenizing." This somewhat dramatic slogan actually contradicts Dewart's own expressed intention. Slogans have a way of glossing over the truth, and this one used by Dewart certainly adds to our already confused impressions of his thesis. It does not accurately state his purpose, for it misses the fact that he is engaged in positively re-interpreting the meaning of God as passed through Greek culture. Neither does the slogan concord with his method. Throughout the book, Dewart is dealing with a whole raft of Hellenistic concepts and ideas. Almost every other word has a Hellenistic root-meaning upon which we are called to build. In addition, Dewart himself is often "Hellenistic" in his interpretation of the documents of faith. We need cite only the exegesis of the prologue of John's gospel that we find in the book. As yet, apart from Bultmann, this reader has never been confronted with so Hellenistic an interpretation of what originally was an Aramaic consciousness of the meaning of God's message in human form: Jesus. Furthermore, that the prologue was written in Greek does not mean that it was Greek in its cultural outlook. Its parabolic structure and poetic repetitive form are clearly Aramaic.

Here it is necessary to note that we are not accusing Dewart of a failing! We *are* Greek, inescapably so. De-Hellenizing is out of kilter with our own culture. Not only our concepts, but also our language is of the same cultural conception. If we were able to de-Hellenize, we would not be able to speak, much less interpret our contemporary experience. For if anything Wittgenstein maintained is true, it is this: our language already is an interpretation of reality. This cannot be avoided. Language, we might say, is a *learned* evaluation of our own personal experience. Language is deeply cultural.

Further indications that de-Hellenizing is impossible can be found. Dewart quotes thinkers clearly articulating in a direct stream of Hellenistic thought. Rahner, for example, takes much of his direction from Heidegger. Heidegger in turn depends a great deal on Husserl and upon Aristotle himself. Husserl began from a starting point enunciated

by Brentano, an ex-Dominican friar steeped in scholastic modes of thinking. To rip out from under these men their essential Hellenism is to cut the meaning right out of their insights. For example, Heidegger's avowed initial insight and the motive force of his life comes from Aristotle: being communicates itself in different ways.

Next, we might ask Dewart's further clarification on two additional impressions gleaned from his work. First, the judgment that history is progressively better underlies much he has written. That is to say, our consciousness of ourselves is *par excellence* the best so far attained in the history of human thought. Are we truly able to maintain this? Frankly we are not sure. The Second World War is argument enough that man can retrogress as well as progress. Of one thing we can be convinced: history and cultures do not advance in a steady, forward and refined progression. Both history and cultures are born, rise to heights, and decline. In any one stage, they can be influential upon other cultures which in turn are in some one of these stages. There is no simple, "high-rise" progression of history as the Marxist would have us believe. There is no evidence for successive stages of higher and higher dialectics. If there is any progress, it is gradual and built upon a cross-cultural grid.

Secondly, the matter of the development of dogma in Dewart seems to rest upon a theory of consciousness proposed by Sartre. As we have mentioned, Christians are directly linked with the past. The realities we discuss are always present to every age, however, in that they are lived and experienced realities. No theologian worth his salt neglects the past; and many find the past more illuminative of our present situation than the reflections of contemporary thinkers. Need we mention Newman himself? He proposed a theory of development of doctrine, yet this could only stem from his intense and life-long devotion to the Fathers. Very definitely, the formulations of the past often clarify our own present experience of Faith. A core-meaning seems to be passed on to us. This core-meaning should be insisted upon, for it brings into bold relief our own disagreement with Dewart. Just as St. Thomas applied his theory of human knowledge to the Church to explain the development of doctrine, so too Dewart applies a contemporary theory of consciousness. In these applications there is a common recognition. Both Dewart and Thomas agree at least in this, that the Church is somehow "like" man in its ability to grow in awareness of itself in relation to its environment. This unformulated agree-

ment is an instance of what is meant by a "core-meaning." And it is this very core which is threatened by the Sartrian theory of consciousness which Dewart employs in his own explanation.

If any one point in his book convinces the reader that he is asked to accept a *total* change in human experience since the Middle Ages, it is the Sartrian mode of consciousness beneath Dewart's theory of the development of dogma. Sartre's view of consciousness allows man to create totally new meanings, arbitrarily and at random. There are no fixed meanings. That is, there is no possibility for a core-meaning to be passed on in the Church out of which it would reflect on its new experiences. If consciousness creates new meaning entirely from scratch, the "coming-into-being" of mind, soul, and man (p. 91), then it is evident that the Church can do the same in Dewart's application of this theory to it.

Since this is the most formidable problem facing the theologians in the Church today, it could be suggested that Dewart clarify his thinking on the development of dogma much more intensively. Besides, few follow Sartre's view of consciousness as a nothing, a pure creative wind. The reason for this rejection is that the Sartrian view is not in accord with our experience. True, we are creative. But our creativity is built upon a facticity, a givenness of meaning. In the light of what we have said about a core of meaning passed on in the consciousness of the Church, Heidegger's theory of consciousness might be a better theory for saving Dewart's thesis. In the Heideggerian view, consciousness is an *act* of man, not man himself. Although consciousness constitutes a self-developing awareness, it does not *cause* it. Consciousness constituting does not mean consciousness causing. It must always operate upon some given. And from this given, consciousness can create a new meaning. Such a theory would preserve both the creativity Dewart demands for the Church, as well as the core-meanings, the relationship to the past demanded by the Faith of the Church.

Finally, we are confused by Dewart's ascription of new experiences to modern man. Just who is having these new experiences? The only thinkers mentioned are the existentialists (broadly speaking) who are only a few of the voices in the world of reflective thought. Indeed they do express something of man's contemporary awareness of himself. But so do the linguistic analysts, the positivists, the scientists, the neo-Hegelians, the pragmatists, the American Naturalists, and so on. Many readers will find that their experience is *not* expressed by De-

wart. The broad generalizations, already mentioned, that "contemporary mankind experiences" are too sweeping to be accepted without reservation. Of all contemporary thinkers, the existentialists might be viewed the least likely to express the experience of others, of "all mankind," since so many of them are engaged in an unending dialectic with themselves. At best they could be taken as only one of the "signs of the times!"

Throughout this discussion of Dewart's fine book, we have been emphasizing disagreements and points in need of further clarification. This is not to imply that we do not agree with the basic issues at stake, and in our common concern that the Church develop along with the cultures of her people. It is only in this development that she can stand as a witness to the world that God has created, redeemed, and now offers sanctification.

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