

# DOCTRINE, THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

By ROBERT BUTTERWORTH

I AM GOING to try to make one simple point to do with the nature of doctrine, and to suggest a way of looking at doctrine which I think is basic to whatever people may want to do in religious education. What I say is neither original nor conclusive.

Let me assure you at the start that I am making no claim to know anything of very direct value about religious education. My experience in the field has been nasty, brutish and short. I now recollect with dismay and shame my own efforts to play the part of a religious educator. As a child I had to learn the catechism. In my youth I was enjoyably taught apologetics by Fr James Leitrim, and what I later recognized to be christian ethics by Fr Frank Somerville. I think both of them displayed an admirable blend of industrious skill and imagination in the way they dealt with sixth-form boys in the late 'forties. But of course this must have been before the days of religious education as it is now conceived. What I think I mean is that christianity itself was somehow not yet a subject on the syllabus. Perhaps it should never be — I just don't pretend to know. My own turn to teach came first of all in the jesuit noviceship.

The fifth of the sixth principal testing experiences prescribed for candidates to the Society in its *General Examen* is:

that of explaining the christian doctrine or part of it in public to boys and other simple persons, or of teaching it to individuals in accordance with what the occasion offers and what seems in our Lord more profitable and suitable to the persons.<sup>1</sup>

In the event, this came down to spending many sunday afternoons in a noisy church hall in Wandsworth, London, trying to elicit garbled catechism answers from a large group of assorted and unruly tiny tots. It did, believe it or not, alleviate the rigours of the noviceship. As a scholastic at the jesuit college in Liverpool, I did much the same thing for two years in one of the first forms, but now as a supposedly light

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<sup>1</sup> *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, ed. Ganss (St Louis, 1970), [69], p 97.

relief from the drudgery of teaching sixth-form classics. As a theologian I used the opportunity to catechize local families on Sunday afternoons, as a much needed escape from the devastating boredom of ecclesiastical studies. As a tertian father in Münster, Westphalia, I spent every week-end as school chaplain and catechist at the British Forces School in the appropriately named German town of Hamm. At other times I gave more catechetical instruction under the pretext of preaching retreats or missions to British or Canadian soldiers, who had been pressed into attendance or, somewhat like myself, were briefly on the run from camp life. From then on there was little opportunity or need to be involved in teaching what were supposed to be the elements of Catholic doctrine. I was led to abandon rudimentary religion for theological research and lecturing.

But I rehearse my dismal and fugitive record in religious education to remind myself that all I ever thought I was supposed to be doing was to be peddling a mixture of reach-me-down doctrine along with second-hand and often dubious theology — and this in the name, and for the furtherance, of Christianity. Never, as far as I can remember, did I ever experience the need to stop and think what on earth it was really all supposed to be about, or what on earth it was all supposed to mean to people, or how on earth it was all supposed to enhance or explain their lives. Perhaps I can hardly blame myself wholly: either I was too stupid to ask such questions, or such questions perhaps simply were not allowed to occur. There did not seem to be the mental space within which the important question about meaning could crop up. But I can see now what was technically wrong with my position. I had no notion of the problem of the complex relationship between the Christian revelation and its expression in the Church's doctrines and in the work of theologians. Simple-mindedly, I had identified Christianity with its doctrinal and theological precipitates. I see now that this simple identification is not tenable; but I also see that the Church's doctrines and the work of theology are nonetheless in some way necessary for Christianity. But how exactly? How is the revelation of God in Christ — essential, as we believe, to the saving of man — linked with the verbal formulas which enshrine the Church's teaching, and with the thinking of theological thoughts? Can we begin to point out the ways in which the Christian revelation and doctrine, and the Christian revelation and theology, are both bound up with one another and yet to be kept apart?

These questions are what I want to try to deal with. I do so because I believe that it is only in this way, by seeing both the distinction and the

unity that holds between revelation and its human expressions, that a place can be made for religious education. It is obvious that I can say nothing of direct utility to religious educators. What I can try to do is to indicate the mental space in which thinking and talking about religious education can and should take place. I am supposing that religious education has something, somehow, to do with educating people with regard to the saving revelation of God in Christ. If this revelation is identical with the Church's doctrinal formulations, or with the common teaching of theologians, then religious education is simply reduced to offering some presentation of doctrines and theology tailored as best they might be to various grasps. Religious education is then straightforward indoctrination. If on the other hand revelation has really nothing to do with doctrines and theology, then religious educators can feel quite free to express whatever they see to be the truth of the christian revelation in whatever ways strike them as being pedagogically best for the people with whom they are dealing. But if revelation on the one side, and doctrines and theology on the other, are neither identical nor wholly separable, then christian religious education seems to me to work somehow within the mental framework thus opened up. It cannot be a matter either of talking airily about the truth of the christian revelation without due regard to the Church's doctrines and the deliverances of theologians, as if these came to the same thing as the christian revelation. What I am saying is that I think we badly need to take a look at the problem of the relationship between revelation, doctrine and theology, in the hope of at least beginning to get the problem right. I am no believer in solutions in those areas of human thought where solutions seem to be systematically excluded by the mysterious nature of what is being thought about. Getting the problem right is what is important here.

It will help to look first at a way of posing the problem which has all the fatal attraction implied in the name I shall give it — 'the Scylla and Charybdis model'. You will recall that in 1907 Fr George Tyrrell published a book of essays called *Through Scylla and Charybdis or the Old Theology and the New*. What he meant, in his dashing way, is possibly not all that clear. Clarity was perhaps not his strongest point. He speaks of 'the two extremes (or extravagances) of theological intransigence and scientific absolutism' as being 'the Scylla of the old theology, and Charybdis of the new'.<sup>2</sup> In a letter to the publisher, he spoke of Scylla

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<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* (London, 1907), p 111.

as 'the rock of tradition; authority, etc.', and of Charybdis as 'the whirlpool of progress, liberty, etc.'<sup>3</sup> I do not think it would be helpful for us to subject the writings of this prophetic figure to too close a scrutiny. But it is useful to extract for our purposes the underlying model of his thought at this point. It involves locating the mental space that the interpreter of christianity feels that he requires for his task between two factors, both of which he feels he must very carefully avoid. He wants room for interpretation, but he feels hemmed in between the sharp rock of authoritative and traditional church dogma, which seems to dictate to him both the content and the form of the christian revelation on the one hand; and on the other hand, the bottomless and ever moving whirlpool of up-to-date thinking about man, about God, or about whatever seems to be of ultimate importance in the world. Our interpreter or prophet feels the need to negotiate his way between the two factors. Without wishing to lose sight of the rock, he does not wish to cling to it or to be smashed on it. Without wishing to abandon himself to the endless revolutions of the whirlpool of secular thought, he nevertheless wishes to extract from such thought what elements of interpretative value he can find without being thereby ship-wrecked. Time will not allow him to drop anchor and wait for some heaven-sent pilot to guide him through. He must forge ahead and risk it. So carefully he plots an eclectic course between two unacceptable extremes, taking selective bearings from the rock, and keeping well on the fringes of the whirlpool, and so moves slowly ahead.

Heavily dramatized though this presentation of the problem that faces the interpreter of christianity undoubtedly is, I cannot think that it is all that far from a description of the dilemma which faces the religious educator who is in some way aware of the problem inherent in his task. But I ask myself: is the Scylla and Charybdis model the right frame of mind in which to view the problem? Is the dilemma of the rock and the whirlpool a false dilemma? Must our quest for mental space lie between these narrow and dangerous extremes? Is there no other way of finding more room for broader and deeper interpretations of christianity such as many of us feel the need for in our teaching?

Now you will note that I have subtly managed to identify the problem I feel I have as a teacher of theology with what I see as the basic problem of religious education. This is not because I view my job as one of what might be called direct religious education. It would be

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<sup>3</sup> *The Heythrop Journal*, 10 (1969), p 291.

quite wrong of me to do so. But neither may I so isolate myself from religious concern in teaching theology, that I refuse to face up to the problem of what on earth christianity might be trying to tell people. If I do, I am not likely to read my christian theology aright. I may not forget that my theology is ultimately not just some abstract scientific exercise, but is the theology of christianity, and must therefore represent an attempt to express the meaning of that unique and decisive self-revelation of God in Jesus which alone, as we believe, saves mankind: and to express that meaning in terms which, inadequate though they must be and must always remain, do maximum contemporary justice to the basic christian fact, that man needs salvation, and that salvation comes from God in Jesus his Son, who was made man. To do my job I need, as the direct religious educator needs to do his, the mental space or intellectual elbow-room in which to interpret the meaning of the christian revelation, to express that meaning meaningfully. I am not convinced that the way of doing this lies between Scylla and Charybdis.

So I turn to indicating another way. I think the path lies along the line suggested by a consideration of the relationship between revelation and doctrine. This may have been what George Tyrrell was looking for when he wrote:

It is therefore to the careful disentanglement of revelation and theology, and to the right adjustment of their relations of mutual dependence and independence, that we may perhaps look for a deliverance from our present grievous embarrassments.<sup>4</sup>

Where he speaks of theology, I would say doctrine. He identified theology with the kind of scholastic theology rife in his day. We do not have the same sad need to make this identification. Our difficulty probably has more to do with church doctrine, not least because we have a different and healthier view than Tyrrell of what constitutes the christian revelation. So what is the right adjustment of the relations of mutual dependence and independence between revelation and doctrine? In what way does the right adjustment provide *lebensraum* for religious education proper?

Rather than try to answer questions in the abstract, I want to take a look at some undisputed cases of church doctrine. For reasons which I hope will emerge, I shall begin with the last in the cases I have chosen, and proceed backwards.

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<sup>4</sup> Tyrrell, *op. cit.*, p 14.

In 451 A.D., the Council of Chalcedon set its seal on christological orthodoxy in the following solemn terms:

In agreement, therefore, with the holy fathers, we all unanimously teach that we should confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same of a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father in Godhead, and the same consubstantial with us in manhood, like us in all things except sin; begotten from the Father before the ages as regards his Godhead, and in the last days, the same, because of us, and because of our salvation begotten from the Virgin Mary, the *Theotokos*, as regards his manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, made known in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference of the natures being by no means removed because of the union, but the property of each nature being preserved and coalescing in one *prosopon* and one *hypostasis* — not parted or divided into two *prosopa*, but one and the same Son, only-begotten, divine Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets of old and Jesus Christ himself have taught us about him and the creed of our fathers has handed down.<sup>5</sup>

My purpose is not to give a commentary on this vital definition, but to ask a simple question. Just what has it told us? This question may seem to some an odd and even a perverse question to ask. That it may seem so, is to my mind a very significant fact. It is as if we almost cease to expect the doctrinal deliverances of the Church to mean anything particular at all; as if we no longer suppose that they might be telling us anything beyond or through what they actually say. Of course, what they actually say might *seem* quite satisfactory. After all, what more need be said about the reality we call the incarnation than is said at Chalcedon? This attitude seems to me to be tolerable, providing no awkward questions are asked about the meaning of the language employed; and as long as one can go on supposing that the language used need not prompt such questions, but is sufficiently clear in its content and meaning as to require no further elucidation. But I find that this is an attitude I can no longer share. It is, for instance, no use pretending that I know what perfect Godhead is, or even what perfect manhood is. I find the word 'consubstantial' with regard to both Godhead and manhood difficult to use. Are Godhead and manhood 'substances' in which one shares? 'Begotten . . . as regards his Godhead' I can have no direct understanding of. Human begetting I can understand, but a timeless or eternal begetting

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<sup>5</sup> From J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London, 1965), pp 339ff.

seems to be nothing else than the negation of all I understand by 'being begotten'. Talk of two unconfused, unchanged, undivided and inseparable natures, united with their properties preserved in one person and *hupostasis*, I find so metaphysical, so far beyond what might be empirically known, that I can assign no obvious sense to it. What I am trying to say is not that the Definition of Chalcedon is meaningless; but that its meaning must be sought elsewhere than in the direction of anything like literal description. It cannot be a literally descriptive account of the divine-human constitution of Christ, of his consubstantiality with God and man, of his eternal begetting, of his being two natures in one person. And this for the very good reason that none of these matters can be literally described. The language used, in other words, must mean something else. Chalcedon must be trying to tell us something other than literal truth.

If I were asked to say what it is trying to say, I think I would reply as follows. What the definition is telling us is that we should, in our thinking and speaking about the reality, the truth of Jesus Christ, stick to certain rules. We are not to think or say anything about him that means or implies that he is anything less than divine; or that he is at the same time anything other than fully human; or that he is *anyone* else than the Son of God in person. As far as I can see, that is all Chalcedon says in its definition: keep these rules in your thinking and your speaking about Christ. Now the reason why the rules have to be kept is, of course, of considerable interest. It is certainly not a matter of any directly rational necessity, as if the need to think and speak in a certain way were the outcome of some kind of metaphysical speculation. And yet it is a *rational* necessity to keep the rules — the reason being that the christian believes in Jesus Christ the man as the Saviour: as the human Saviour of mankind who brings salvation of a certain kind, a kind that is beyond the unaided grasp of man himself, and that comes to man from what is eternally beyond him. The logic of this faith in this kind of saviour is what dictates the rational necessity to think and speak of Jesus Christ as both God and man at the same time. Behind the rules for christological thinking and speaking lies christian faith at its most basic — belief in God who saves us as Jesus. It is this faith that calls for correct understanding; and correct understanding is correct, if, and only if, it is in accordance with the rules dictated by the faith itself. This dictation of the rules for correct understanding, for right and orthodox thinking and speaking about Christ, I would equate with the definition of doctrine by the Church. In other words, this is what doctrines are, and this is how we should view them: rules for christian discourse.

Obviously I am opening up a huge problem to do with the nature of doctrine and of doctrinal statements. To go into this problem would be interesting indeed. I wonder, for instance, what an approach like this does for the theory of the development of doctrine? It could, it seems to me, do it a lot of good by cutting it down to something like credible size. Like many others, I find it hard to accept the idea of a Church feeding her young on pre-digested information presented as the regurgitated revelation of what was originally deposited in her, somehow, before the death of the last apostle. Even if this is something of a caricature of the more sophisticated theories of doctrinal development, it comes perilously close to what many Catholics might be inclined to say if pressed on the subject. I find it much easier to accept the notion of a Church, in virtue of her common belief in salvation through Christ, insisting with all the weight of her God-given authority (for her faith itself comes from God) on the rules for orthodox understanding being kept; and doing this by defining doctrines as the need arises. But further into this problem I do not wish to go. I shall move on to a second example of church doctrine, and deal with it briefly along the lines I have already indicated.

In 325 A.D., the Council of Nicea was convoked to make a theological move called for by the teaching of Arius. Arius taught that Christ was less than divine. Arius's notion of God was a philosophical notion. God absolute, utterly transcendent, eternal, indivisible, and, above all else, *unbegotten*, and quite beyond the world of becoming and change. Taking this metaphysically defined God quite literally, Arius obviously had to exclude the Son of God from full divinity. The Son was by definition begotten, as all sons must be. He had become — in other words he was a creature merely, however exalted a creature he might be thought to be. Furthermore, Arius had scripture texts to prove it: 'the Lord created me at the beginning of his ways';<sup>6</sup> 'the Father is greater than I'.<sup>7</sup> Then sometimes Christ was referred to as 'the first-born', and so forth.<sup>8</sup> Now if there was one thing wrong with Arius, it was that he was a literalist. He took language about God quite literally. His philosophical theology told him that God was incapable of literal begetting; and his scripture studies told him literally that Christ the Son was begotten, or created. So the inevitable conclusion was that Christ the Son was not God. But the logic of the true faith must disallow

<sup>6</sup> Prov 8, 22 (Septuagint version).

<sup>7</sup> Jn 14, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Cf Rom 8, 29; Col 1, 15; etc.



such a conclusion. Faith in Christ as bringer of a divine salvation implies that Christ is God. Arius, in thinking and speaking as he did, was not keeping the rules dictated by the christian faith. His language was wrong, and he a heretic. The Nicene Council's reaction in favour of orthodoxy is very illuminating.

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father . . .<sup>9</sup>

If there is a more pointed way of flying in the face of heretical literalism than this magnificent assertion, it is difficult to think of it. The assertion is an amazing mixture of metaphor and metaphysical myth, using images like 'light' and abstractions like 'substance', and even the famous *homoousion*, 'of one substance', a word apparently banished from orthodox discourse more than half a century earlier. And yet the Council's Creed does the one thing that has to be done. It established once and for all the basic rule for christian thinking and speaking about Christ — a rule whose validity was re-affirmed at Chalcedon, as we have seen: that the christian may think or say nothing of Christ that signifies that Christ is less than fully God. Behind this rule the Church placed the fullness of her own authoritative belief. She made no claim to be in possession of literal information about the nature or substance of God, about the process of divine begetting and so forth — information she could just produce when called on to stifle heresy. All she needed to do, in order to be true to the logic of her own faith, was to counter the out-of-date literalism of the arian heresy with the minimum requirements for orthodox christian discourse: say nothing of Christ which indicates that he is less than God. If this meant introducing novel and even dubious terms in christian theology, so be it. The faith is what must be preserved in whatever way it needs to be preserved. One can scarcely help noting how this view of the Council of Nicea stands our usual view of heresy as novelty in theological thinking neatly on its hoary head. Here the novelty comes all from the orthodox side. Heresy is out-of-date literal thinking about the faith. If we were to pursue this line of thought, we could, as in the case of the theory of doctrinal development, get into some very interesting country. But I prefer to leave that matter there.

<sup>9</sup> Kelly, *op. cit.*, p 232.

The third and last case of church doctrine I wish to consider is what is reliably considered to be the most basic and indeed the earliest christological concession or 'doctrinal' expression regarding Christ in the New Testament: 'Jesus is Lord'. I have proceeded backwards to this point because I wish to show that this case of doctrinal expression is best considered along the same lines as Chalcedon and Nicea; that, in other words, taking refuge in scripture, considered as in some way opposed to later theology, leads nowhere. The doctrinal deliverances of scripture seem to me to share exactly the same nature as the later conciliar definitions of doctrine, and this precisely because they are doctrinal. They are attempts to give rules for christian thought and language. Of course the background of scripture may be more semitic than hellenistic, and its characteristic thinking more functional than ontological, more dynamic than static, according to whatever way you wish to express the fairly superficial differences between scripture and later writings. But no less than the Definition of Chalcedon, and the Creed of Nicea, the confession that 'Jesus is Lord' says that in order to get the truth about Jesus right, in order to express the fully christian belief in Jesus, you must keep the rule of thinking and speaking of him in the term used of Yahweh in the Old Testament. You must believe in him as being properly denominated by the very title that the Septuagint translators used for Yahweh in their version of the Old Testament — *kurios*, Lord. Otherwise the christian faith is imperilled in that Jesus is reduced to less than God in person. Yet it is faith that dictates the keeping of the rule, faith which is the gift of the holy Spirit of God himself. Hence Paul: 'I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, "Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the holy Spirit'.<sup>10</sup> Equally truly, the spirit of true faith will call for the confession of Jesus as Lord, and will lay down the rule that all expression of belief in Jesus, if that belief is to be orthodox, christian saving belief, will not fall short in what it says of his full divinity.

Doctrine, whether defined or scriptural, is, it seems to me, best considered as a kind of language rule to be applied to christian thought and talk about the faith. The faith itself is faith in God our Saviour, in Jesus of Nazareth, faith in the reality of man's salvation by God in Christ. This faith, if it is to be preserved and promoted intact by the Church whose common faith it is, calls for expression and understanding. But

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Cor 12, 3.

not for any sort of expression and understanding. There are rules to be kept, and the rules are what the doctrines of the Church are about. But in a changing world the christian faith also calls for interpretation, but again not any sort of interpretation. There are rules to be kept. It is here, I think, that we at the last come back to the needs of religious educators. It seems to me not possible to fail those for whom we are responsible by not venturing any interpretation of saving christian truth. Indeed, the very fact that Christ is our Saviour, and that we are saved by faith in him, surely demands that that faith be interpreted to men in graspable and meaningful terms. Else how are they to be saved? But I have tried to show that the rules for interpretation are our old friends, the doctrines of the Church. These are not the content of the educational effort, but the essential guide-lines for the task of interpretation which is central to religious education. I think I have also managed to locate religious education in relation to the faith and its doctrines: to give religious educators the sort of mental elbow-room or living-space wherein they should work. The space is not the narrow channel of the modernist between the rocky Scylla of tradition and the free-for-all whirlpool Charybdis of merely human speculation on ultimate matters. The traditional doctrines of the Church, I believe, are more like light-houses, never to be lost sight of, to be sure, but then not perhaps to be clung too close to; since like lighthouses they themselves mark reefs and shallows, while they also give us infallible directions as to how we should proceed in the difficult task of plotting our courses across the deep things of God.