The Future of Belief Revisited

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These pages are dedicated to all those who, like Rip van Winkle and myself, awoke one day to a world they had not been educated for.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you". . .... Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haram. (Genesis, 12:1 and 4)

We have always understood that the basic pattern for the individual Christian is new life through death, resurrection beyond crucifixion; maybe what we are now called upon to learn is that what is true of the individual is also true of the Church. (J. Blenkinsopp)

I first want to thank Mr Rupert Enderle for taking up Dewart’s challenge with such conviction, honesty and competence (MB XXIII (1969) p. 327-34 and 389-96). The fact that we stand on opposite sides of the “barricades” does not mean that I do not appreciate his deep concern for the Church and its traditional thought patterns.

The MB is not the right forum for a clash of philosophical or theological systems. And, anyway, what is dividing us and what forms the real issue in the “future of belief debate” is not, after all, a difference of theoretical systems. Maybe I can best make this felt by a rather blunt comment on Mr Enderle’s closing phrase, “A strong sense of responsibility towards God and fear of his authority seem to be our sole hope for survival and the best guarantee for the safety of the world.” (MB, p. 396) It seems to me that a cold appraisal of the actual situation should make us conclude: if the future of the world depends on a recognition, along the traditional dividing lines, of our traditional idea of God, then the world has no future. Can we really hope that the political leaders of the communist world—and those of the ‘Christian’ world, for that matter—will be guided by those principles? Should we not open our eyes to the ongoing “secularization?” “The world has begun to function without religious presuppositions and to function just as well as it did before.”¹ So, our difference of opinion may boil down to a different evaluation of our historical situation and a fundamental difference in “placing” our Christian hope.

I sincerely hope that my remarks on the letter of Enderle’s rich article will also reveal a little bit the real heart of the matter.

Enderle objects to Dewart’s characterization of our time as a “world come of age,” with the concomitant characterization of traditional Christendom as “infantile.” To quote Dewart himself: “The traditional form has necessarily and logically been childish and infantile to the very degree that it corresponded to an earlier, relatively childish, infantile stage of human evolution.” (Dewart, p. 51)

Let us first concede that every “periodization” of history is at its best a sweeping generalization and, therefore, never does justice to all the facts. It is very plausible a priori that we are right now losing some forms of human maturity which mankind in the past possessed; and Dewart would be the first, I guess, to admit this. But Dewart sees the general line of the human evolution as an upward one, a “progressive heightening of consciousness” (p. 22), a shedding of protective illusions and thus an “education to reality.” (p. 23)

The underlying view of history and of a real evolution is, of course, fundamental. We cannot, however, go into this here. But in order to do justice to Dewart’s thought we have to remark: (1) The background against which Dewart is speaking: a fundamental trend in all European philosophy since Hegel, which cannot be disregarded in our dialogue with the contemporary world. Dewart does not hesitate to go along with this trend: “... if this qualification is kept in mind, it is as difficult to disagree with Freud’s portrayal of the role that in point of fact religion has come to fulfill in Western Christendom, as with Marx’s assertion that, like opium, religion has in fact been placed by man at the service of a self-exploitative mode of social organization.” (p. 27) (2) Dewart stresses the point that Freud himself “implied that there might be deeper sources of religious experience than illusionary wish-fulfillment.” (p. 22) While admitting that our traditional religious form was “relatively childish” (my italics), he remarks, “But we might go beyond Freud and insist that it was not only healthy, but also proper and good, under concrete historical and cultural conditions for Christian theism to have taken the ‘illusory’ forms it has. No one need, or indeed should, regret having lived a younger life...” (p. 35)

Maybe we cannot help feeling shocked and humiliated when we hear it said that we have been childish but, supposing it is true, it would not be gracious on our part not to admit that Dewart tries to be “gentle” about it all. And, again supposing that it is true, it had to be said.

Enderle is undoubtedly right in linking Dewart to Bishop John A.T. Robinson and other Protestant writers, for they are certainly close in their basic concern. Which goes to prove once more that “the official differences between the churches are no longer the real ones. The frontiers no longer run along the traditional lines drawn on the confessional maps... Facts reduce traditional differences almost to irrelevance.”

On the other hand, it remains, indeed, true that, on account of Dewart’s Catholic scholastic background, “his book has many features of its own” (MB, 330) and, I may add, is easier to understand for us, Catholics. I would like to specify two points wherein Dewart seems to differ from many contemporary Protestant authors:

1. He never makes the clear-cut separation between “religion” (rejected whole-

2 H.J. Schultz, ibid., p. 80.
sale) and "Christian faith" (sustained)—separation which is often found in post-
Barthian Protestant circles.
2. He does not reject metaphysics, neither in itself (as a "pre-scientific cultural
phenomenon" or as "belonging to a previous stage of man's development")
nor as the exercise of our natural intellect in connection with our Christian
experience.

I know, of course, that there is no end of confusion about the word "meta-
physics," and that Dewart's book itself is not free of it. Let me try out,
therefore, a minimal definition: "an endeavor of a comprehensive and unify-
ing understanding of reality." Dewart certainly rejects what he calls "Greek
metaphysics" or "metaphysics of being," and even says that what makes both
Greek philosophy and Scholasticism "metaphysical," is their adoption of Par-
menides' postulate of the equivalence of being and intelligibility. (p. 153)
Nevertheless, B. Lonergan is right when he says that Dewart "would get be-
yond 'speculative-ideological metaphysics' (p. 163) and establish a 'metaphysics
of presence'. (p. 169)"3 Indeed, Dewart advocates "an adequate contempo-
rary Christian philosophy" (p. 165) and "ontological enquiry." (p. 169)

I suppose that it is clear, even to the superficial reader of Dewart's book,
that its strength lies in its very pertinent criticisms of the classical metaphysics,
adopted by us Catholics, rather than in its positive contributions to a new
metaphysics, which may not be overly new, deep or consistent but which,
nevertheless, probe for a direction, in constant dialogue with the mentality
of modern man.

On p. 331 of his article, Enderle tells us that "Dr Dewart has acknowledged
that many have told him that he has misunderstood Thomism, but that no-
body could show him in what point this is the case." Actually, Dewart does
not say "Thomism," but "the thought of St Thomas."4 He does not say that
the reviewers did not show him the difference with their (mutually contradict-
ing) interpretations of the nature and historical role of St Thomas' doctrine,
but that this is not sufficient to prove them right and himself wrong. Dewart
tells us in The Future of Belief Debate, "Gilson and Maritain have been among
the chief philosophical influences I have undergone."5 It is only natural, then,
that he argues mostly with their understanding of St Thomas' thought, with-
out explicit reference to Marechallian or Lonergian Thomism.

In his search for the sources of Dewart's thought, Enderle points out that
"one can find in his thought distinct influences of the philosophy of existence
and of phenomenology. None of the reviewers in the Debate-book has, in my
opinion, taken this sufficiently into consideration;" (MB, p. 330) and "... he
himself uses many terms of a particular and limited circle of people, i.e., of
the adherents of the philosophy of existence." (MB, p. 331)

Enderle does not limit Dewart's background to the sole existentialists (cf.
MB, p. 329-31) but, nevertheless, the impression is created that his existential-
ist background has something to do with the allegation that Dewart would be
simply one more noisy representative of a "small group" (MB, p. 329 and

3 B. Lonergan, "The Dehellinization of Dogma," in Theological Studies, June 1967,
p. 342.
5 Ibid., p. 212.
of irresponsible radicals. (cf. MB, p. 334 and 393) Paul Van Buren says, "The other language for Dewart seems to be that of a certain strand of French existentialism..., simply ignoring the challenges of empiricism, pragmatic and analytic philosophy." And E. Mackinnon speaks of "the extreme narrowness of Dewart's philosophical base..., a peculiar fusion of ideas from Gabriel Marcel and the later writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein." Hereby I would like to make the following remarks:

1. Although the influence of existentialism cannot be denied, Dewart's position differs profoundly from that of existentialism. To mention only three (important) factors: Dewart has a much more positive view of history. He is not tempted to reduce the significance of Incarnation and Redemption to the existential (neglecting the physical and the socio-political), or again to "create" a God good only for the emergencies with which we cannot cope.

2. The emergence in Dewart's book of some terms dear to existentialism seems to have blinded many reviewers for the fact that Dewart wants to be the representative, not of a school of theoretical thought, but simply of contemporary man, and that he succeeds to a high degree precisely in doing that, because his real inspiration, base and background is not one limited philosophical school but his own experience as contemporary man in dialogue with the major trends of modern philosophy.

Indeed, European thought of the 19th and 20th centuries may be very heterogeneous, but it has some "points of convergence," which may be interpreted as "the signs of the times" (which Vatican II encourages us to read). When Dewart speaks of "The enormity of the challenge hurled at Catholic philosophy by the fairly recently acquired human consciousness of the historicity of all thought," he touches one of these points and thereby reveals one of his major concerns. The creativity of man in the building of his socio-cultural "world" is one more of these fundamental trends. It may be that each one of the modern philosophies (and existentialism in particular) is, in a sense, one-sided, not perfectly balanced, and short-lived in comparison with Thomas' majestic synthesis of the medieval worldview, but the fact has to be faced that man has left that worldview behind on a voyage of no return. Dewart knows that Catholic philosophy, Catholic theology, and most of all the Catholic proclamation of the Good Tidings have to wake up to that fact and that time is running short.

That too many still think that the world is now drunk and in its drunk- eness produces Hegelianism, Darwinism, Marxism, Freudianism, Existentialism, etc.; but that it will come back to its senses, forget all that nonsense and fall back on good old Thomism. "Many Catholic thinkers will... pretend... that the problem is specious, that the challenge does not exist. Or if they admit it exists, they will deal with it as with a threat, supposing that the problem arises not from the normal, natural, creative development of thought, but from man's sinful perversion of his intellect." Dewart is convinced (and, if that matters to anybody, I am too) that the world may eventually forget Marxism, Existentialism, etc., as particular sys-

7 America, April 15, 1967, p. 554.
8 O.c., p. 228-9.
9 Ibid., p. 229.
tems, but that it can never undo the development of human consciousness, of which these philosophical systems are but signs and symptoms.

While Van Buren sees the task at hand as “continuing Thomas’ program of translation into the dominant philosophical idiom,”10 Mackinnon is truer to Dewart’s intentions when he says, “To reformulate Catholic thought in the terms that structure contemporary experience.”11

But we have to return to the letter of Enderle’s text. “Dr Dewart’s own philosophy which he offers in place of the Scholastic philosophy is basically and generally a relativism.” (MB, p. 330) I suppose that, in comparison with “absolutist” and “immobilist” Scholasticism, the term “relativism” makes sense. But, then, of course, we would be guilty of a petitio principii if, in this comparison, we would, from the beginning, attach to the word “relativism” all the connotations and all the odium with which this term has been surrounded by the same “absolutist” Scholasticism.

What Dewart is trying to cope with is the fact that the “recently acquired human consciousness of the historicity of all thought” breaks through the classical dichotomy of absolute-relative, and puts the philosopher before a new problematic which cannot be adequately tackled any longer with the old categories.

Something similar might be said in connection with what Enderle calls Dewart’s “aversion to theoretical thought.” (MB, p. 395) Enderle seems to say that Dewart confuses theoretical and practical philosophy (cf. MB, p. 390) and forgets that “What can be tried on the touchstone of public examination is only that what is objectively valid for everybody.” (MB, p. 331)

Modern philosophy has been guilty of driving subject and object apart but, on the other hand, has done some valuable analytical work which suggests that, when it comes to human matters, it may not be possible to take theoretical and practical philosophy apart; that (always in human matters) “objectively valid” (MB, p. 331) means, at its best, a “wider kind of objectivity” (MB, p. 391) which, in its turn is not conceivable apart from human intersubjectivity. Here again the dichotomy, in this case the relationship between “subjective” and “objective,” appears in a new light. And when Dewart wants to try some theories “on the touchstone of public examination,” he is not simply looking for an objective logical universality, but for something for which we have as yet no satisfying name but which we can provisionally indicate as “truth in dialogue,” “dialectical universality,” etc.

Is it not high time for us to clearly recognize that in matters of man’s ultimate concern, the words “objective,” “proof,” “verification,” etc., take on a meaning profoundly different from the one they have in physical science?

Another of Enderle’s grievances is that Dewart “is missing the other possibility” of knowing the existence of something besides empirical intuition, namely “by conclusion on the basis of the experience of something else, e.g., sicut causa ex effectu.” (MB, p. 332) It is true, of course, that Dewart does not explicitly examine the whole range of the Thomistic “intellectus principiorum,” but his explanations (especially on p. 158ff. and 177-178, note 6) seem to indicate clearly enough that he does not ignore or be unaware of the

10 O.c., p. 494.
11 O.c., p. 553.
way to God through causality, but rejects it, at least in the usual sense of an argument establishing the existence of a being whose essence (or concept) is known to all.

In fact, Dewart's book tends to show that our traditional philosophical parlance, namely the attribution to God of "essence" and "existence," leads our thinking into dangerous straits. Can this dichotomy be really bridged by any causality? (As Dewart notes, on p. 156, "The answer matters less than the doubt it implies.") And further, did and can a metaphysics of being, no matter how refined, ever do justice to the God of the Bible? Can it ever avoid presenting God as a localizable "that-which-is" alongside and over against other beings, a thing-in-itself apart from other things?

Most Catholic thinkers, while more or less conscious of the problem, will share, I guess, E. Burke's conviction "That a metaphysics of being is the basic resource for any intelligible formulation of theism even for the contemporary man."12 They will, of course, consider that our human language will always be deficient when it comes to speaking about God. And they may feel confident since they continue a long tradition.

Dewart, together with a seemingly growing group of Christian thinkers (how big? how small? Can Enderle tell me?) opts out and proposes some guidelines for a "metaphysics of presence" or a "metaphysics of God's presence in history." In this last point, too, Dewart is not completely original nor completely solitary. Tillich, Bultmann, H.J. Schultz, Robinson, a.o., seem to look in the same direction. But, although Dewart makes it abundantly clear that his theories are only tentative, he might be the most systematical of them all in his new approach to the idea of God.

This brings us to the basic question: which is the motivation behind Dewart's attitude? What makes him—and others—jump off the wagon of a long and venerable tradition? Fundamentally, the two following considerations:

1. Our "hellenic" philosophical and theological tradition is largely unbiblical. Harvey Cox speaks of "A long tradition in Western philosophy in which the biblical God and the Platonic idea of the Good have been melted down and coalesced into a new alloy. But in the process something essential to the biblical God has been lost."13 Dewart himself speaks of the Christian God being gradually turned into a modified metaphysical God, with especially his typical N.T.-character as Triune and Incarnate relegated to the realm of the "accidents." (p. 135 sq.)

I must confess that Dewart's arguments on this point impressed me very much. They seem to me to express rather forcibly the vague misgivings I had been feeling for a long time. And I did not find the critic yet who dared to answer Dewart on this essential point.

2. Our traditional concepts are unable to convey the Christian message to modern man. Bultmann says, "Only the idea of God which can find... the transcendent in the present at hand, as possibility of encounter, is possible for modern man."14 For Dewart himself this point is clear and beyond question. One can feel in his book his deeply "pastoral" concern for his own

14 Journal of Theology and the Church, Vol. II, p. 94.
faith and the faith of his contemporaries. Some critics have looked for baser motives, but I can only call this kind of fault-finding scientifically uncalled-for and definitely unchristian.

Prompted by the above considerations, Dewart has obeyed Reinhold Schneider's injunction, "Let us be on our way, not knowing our destination," and shows thereby a "willingness to leave the Land of the Fathers," which can, of course, be interpreted as an irresponsible spirit of adventure but also as a generous answer to the call of Abraham's God. Everybody has, of course, a right to form his own opinion, but we should be careful not to prejudge the issue. It may very well be that what God expects from us now is not in the first place fidelity to "what has always been," to "what we have become," but precisely a true missionary spirit in the sense defined by H.J. Schultz, "Mission must involve the readiness to jettison customs and traditions that have hitherto been thought essential... Mission is a departure with no hope of return."

So, let us at least be aware of the fact that sin cannot only take the form of a reckless move away from tradition but also that of sloth and attachment to our traditions. We should give ourselves a chance to discern the spirits in an unprejudiced and open dialogue.

And the answer we do eventually come up with, will—I guess—in the last analysis be determined by the way we read our times. Whether we consider the whole upheaval to be only a passing ripple on the changeless sea of human nature or, on the contrary, a real and irreversible change in the human condition. Here again I agree with Schultz: "The changes in our world are so radical that the traditional efforts to make reforms are wholly inadequate to meet today's real need. A touch of make-up will not suffice. The old bottles are no good for the new wine. Something unparalleled is in the process of happening. We cannot remain unaffected by it, the same people that we were yesterday." Enderle and many with him will not agree, and I suggest that this is the real and fundamental frontier between us, together with the fact that I believe that, fundamentally, this evolution of mankind goes in God's direction, not as if God predestined it but that He blesses it as the work of his creatures. Enderle, on the other hand, sees God's blessing—and thus man's hope—essentially in the past.

Not very enthusiastic about my statement that Dewart's book "might prove doubly valuable for us as missionaries," Enderle warns us missionaries not to "indulge in the belief of magical results if only a certain part of the traditional doctrines is thrown over board." (MB, p. 329) I am indebted to Mr Enderle for providing me with this opportunity to explain what advantages I see for missionaries in books like this one by L. Dewart.

First, I can only state that I never thought of any magical results. Second, I really think that we ought to examine our traditional doctrines very carefully to see whether we should not throw overboard part of them; not in order to obtain (magical or other) results, but in strict justice to our listeners, the Japanese. If a doctrine, no matter how "traditional," instead of conveying the Gospel of Christ to the Japanese, hides it from them, it is our strict obligation.
to throw it out. I know that this is a very delicate process, for we should make sure not to give up "a iota" of Christ's mission. "And that is why I welcome Dewart's book so much. As James F. Anderson has it in the Debate-book, "Professor Dewart and other Christian philosophers are to be thanked for helping us to see more clearly the unique independence of Christian belief vis-à-vis all philosophies." 17

Every missioner knows how much has been written about adaptation, indigenization, acculturation to the mission countries. Dewart's book shows how the whole Church now stands in need of adaptation, adaptation to another culture; it shows in a unique way that "Church=Mission." As long as this consciousness did not really exist in the West, missionaries were never permitted to go any length in adaptation. I am naive enough to believe that, when theologians in Europe and America—it is good to see that America starts really contributing to theology—will begin to tackle the problems pointed out by Dewart, we missionaries are going to profit by their efforts. There may, of course, be a difference between the relation of successive Christian cultural forms, on the one hand, and the relation of a Christian cultural form with, e.g., a Buddhist cultural form, on the other hand. And, for instance, Dewart's presentation, even when completely worked out, would not be immediately applicable to Japan: "post-theistic" theology is not directly adapted to a non-theistic culture.

But, besides the fact that, on some points at least, Dewart's presentation is definitely nearer the Japanese way of thinking than our traditional catechism (lack of space forbids me to develop this), Dewart teaches us at least to sit lightly to our traditional ways of thinking—a grace we might do well to pray for every day.

As a conclusion of this too long article, I would like to apply the following words by Ruth Robinson to the Church in the modern world, and especially to the Church in the missions:

For a Christian, all language is focused in the living Word, the man Jesus, who in terms of flesh and blood spelt out for us the meaning of our life.... Our task as parents is to help our children to 'hear' this living Word for themselves.... And we must make sure that our spoken language, our explanations and definitions, make it easier not harder, for them to hear with the inner ear this Word of life." 18

17 p. 48.