

THE LANGUAGE OF DEBATE

THE EDITOR

THERE is a method of formal argument, that of the scholastic disputation, which has for centuries been part of the traditional discipline of Catholic universities and houses of study. Conducted in Latin and regulated by the strict demands of logical forms, it is an exact instrument for sober debate. Within the last year or two, in an English dress but otherwise unchanged, it has in many places (and even when broadcast) achieved a popularity which at first might seem surprising. For some, no doubt its interest is simply that of a survival: a Gothic monument in a prefab world. But behind its intricacies there lies a candour of intellectual debate which must appeal to many who are weary alike of the private unintelligibilities of so many specialists and of the amorphous generalisations of the world of the Light Programme and the popular press.

But the habit of a developed argument, proceeding from a first principle to its necessary applications, is so alien to the mood of universal semi-literacy, that nowadays it might be said that the function of the true syllogism—like that of art—is to conceal itself. The truth is not dependent on a particular technique for its exposition, and the significance of the method of scholastic disputation, at least for general argument, is that what is useful is not necessarily the outer structure which mesmerises the observer with its cleverness but the underlying validity of its conditions of debate.

And of those conditions the precise definition of terms is perhaps the most important. There is a whole vocabulary of generalities which has by this almost ceased to have an immediate and imperative meaning. 'Conscience', 'natural law', 'freedom', 'democracy', 'culture': for their defenders they seem axiomatic, and if they are defined at all it is in terms of a jargon, unexamined afresh, which can be a dead language to those who are ignorant of, or indifferent to, the first principles they presuppose.

Another feature, that of concession-and-denial, can be, must indeed be, part of any useful argument. A monolithic statement of principle, remote from the experience of an adversary, can impress, but it will not necessarily compel, agreement. 'You want

the right ideas: we have them' is a courageous claim, but it is not usually a winning one.

And good manners, the practical reflection of the virtue of charity as they are meant to be, are by no means an optional ornament of debate. The '*carissime frater*' with which the scholastic disputant greets his opponent at each point of the argument is not only a convention: it implies that the resolute search for truth will itself be betrayed if its motive shift to malice or self-importance.

It is scarcely necessary to indicate the application of such simple principles as these. But Mr Douglas Hyde's article in this issue of *BLACKFRIARS* is a sufficient reminder of their practical importance. It is idle to attack a manufactured enemy and to exult over the triumphs of a dialectic within a chosen, closed circle. A human debate is concerned not with abstractions but with the ideas that human persons hold. And it is necessary to be sure of the limits one need defend. It is easy enough to show, for instance, how false is the assumption that a Catholic sociology is friendly to totalitarian, or even merely snobbish, views of man's function in society. But it may be that the large names on the bill, the writers with wit and an immediate hearing, have seemed to identify their personal (and no doubt legitimate) variety of opinion with a Catholic authority they cannot claim. And all who read are not equipped to make the necessary distinctions.

There is an immense need today for the rediscovery of a means of presenting the truth in a language and with an emphasis that may touch the hearts as well as the minds of our own generation. It is always true, as Lord Acton remarked in a famous letter to *The Times*, that 'Our Church stands and our faith shall stand, not on the writing of men, but on the surer ground of an institution and guidance that are divine'. But it remains equally true that Christ has committed his work to the hands of men: they may never destroy it, but they can help or hinder it, and their words are the human condition of its growth.