

THESIS AND HYPOTHESIS

A valuable note by P. Joseph Lecler has recently pointed out that "the distinction between 'thesis' and 'hypothesis' entered the language of theology only in the nineteenth century," although the terminology had been current in the schools of rhetoric of the Greco-Roman world.¹ The first Catholic use of the terms, at least in connection with politico-religious questions, is found in the *Civiltà cattolica* in an article published in 1863. P. Lecler cites a paragraph which illustrates one of the ways in which the writer uses them. However, he does not render an account of the real innovation for which this article was responsible. That this was no mere matter of terms, but of a whole mental outlook which persists in many quarters today, is suggested by a closer study of the evidence.

It might be useful to begin with Msgr. Dupanloup's famous pamphlet in defense of the Syllabus of Errors which Pius IX had published, together with the Encyclical, *Quanta cura*, on December 8, 1864. It has been said that Dupanloup, the leading episcopal supporter of the Catholic Liberals in France, used the distinction between thesis and hypothesis to explain the Syllabus of Errors when its appearance opened the floodgates of abuse, misrepresentation, and repression of the Church in France. The distinction is referred to as being one current in the schools. On both counts this is inaccurate. Dupanloup's magnificent defense of the Syllabus against the extravagant attacks of the French press makes little or no use at all of this distinction.² He did not need to use it. All he needed to do was to make clear what it really was that the Pope had condemned, and to show that he had not condemned what no sane man, let alone the Head of the Church, would condemn. His only reference to this distinction is a passing one, where he is listing the ordinary principles of interpretation of any document such as the Syllabus. Towards the end of these he places this one: "One must distinguish between absolute propositions and relative ones; for what might be admissible *en hypothèse* will often be false *en thèse*." He passes on and never uses the expressions again.

But we must pause to look at what precisely he says, and not be misled by words. True, he contrasts *thèse* and *hypothèse*; true, he speaks of "what might be admissible *en hypothèse*." But when he speaks of the *thèse*, it is not the Catholic position which he refers to, but the Liberalist view. And this is a

¹ Joseph Lecler, "A propos de la distinction de la 'thèse' et de l' 'hypothèse,'" *Recherches de science religieuse*, XLI (Oct.-Dec., 1953), 530-34.

² *La convention du 15 septembre et l'encyclique du 8 décembre*, par Mgr. l'Evêque d'Orléans (Paris, 1865).

very different outlook. It is one thing to maintain that such and such is the Catholic view and to erect it into an absolute principle, a *thèse*; it is quite another thing to say that certain opinions or views may be admissible in given circumstances, but are false if dignified into absolute principles, into the *thèse* which must govern all the world. In other words, he is condemning extreme Liberalism for erecting its tenets into a *thèse*, however workable and admissible they may at times prove to be. He is not saying what might be the Catholic *thèse*, of which the *hypothèse* would be a provisional if necessary derogation.

This becomes perfectly clear when he is explicitly handling the question of freedom of worship, the *liberté des cultes*. He first refers to the recognized teaching of theologians that to grant civil liberties to a dissenting denomination does not involve adopting the tolerated beliefs, quoting Fénelon's advice to James II: "Grant civil toleration, not that you approve of all indiscriminately, but that you allow patiently all that God allows, and try to win men back by kindly persuasion." He pursues:

But some people, going much farther than these principles, want to make unrestricted freedom of worship (*la liberté illimitée des cultes*) into a universal ideal, one that is absolute and obligatory at all times, in every country, and want to impose on all men, even on the Pope and the Church, the idea that anarchy of minds and the multiplication of sects is the best condition of society, and the peak of religious and social perfection.

Well, then, No! The Pope does not think such an ideal to be the best. He has for himself and for the Church another ideal, and you must never ask them to make practical necessities that are merely relative into absolute truths, to transform regrettable facts and unfortunate divisions which are tolerated, into dogmatic principles.

It is clear enough that, though Dupanloup is not using the terms, he is distinguishing between the *thèse* and the *hypothèse*, but the *thèse* is the condemned "ideal," not the Catholic one. And how does he speak of the Catholic ideal? He goes on in words which have a very modern ring:

No, the ideal of Pope and Church alike, is not the anarchy but the harmony of minds; it is not the division but the union of souls. The ideal of the Church and of the Pope is the magnificent saying of Christ: "That they may be one! *Unum sint!*" One single flock. One only Shepherd. *Unum ovile! Unus pastor!* All minds united by the truth, all hearts united in love: that is the ideal of the Pope and of the Church.

If the purpose here and now were to complete the Archbishop's explanation of the Syllabus in this matter, several pages would deserve to be re-

produced at once: on the actual desire for unity throughout Christendom, and its desirability; his repudiation of the use of force as a means to this unity, with ample patristic illustrations; his refusal to admit, as a universal principle, the non-recognition of any religion by the state; above all, his indignant repudiation of the charge that, "if we talk of 'liberty' when we are weak, it is only in order to refuse it to others when we hold the power." The *Civiltà* article discussed below agrees here with Dupanloup (cf. p. 142). But the object of these quotations was only to show to what extent and in what sense Dupanloup made use of the distinction between *thèse* and *hypothèse*. Before we leave him, we must recall that his interpretation of the Syllabus in this fighting pamphlet induced no less than six hundred and thirty bishops to write to him in spontaneous praise and grateful congratulation—a result perhaps unparalleled in the annals of the Church. Not only that, but Pius IX himself honored him in a special Brief, in which he recognized that Dupanloup had refuted the calumnious interpretations of the *Quanta cura* and the Syllabus, and had now rejoined his episcopal brethren who condemned the modern errors in the precise way in which the Pope himself had condemned them (*eodem plane sensu quo a Nobis fuerant reprobati*)!³

But it was also questioned above whether this distinction had really been current in the schools, i.e., traditional in Catholic theology. One is led to doubt it by Abbot Butler's reference to "the distinction of *thesis* and *hypothesis* first drawn by the *Civiltà*, the almost semi-official organ of the Vatican, edited by the Roman Jesuits." It will be of interest to outline its first presentation there, little more than a year before Dupanloup wrote. In passing we note how Abbot Butler characterizes the distinction: "What could not be held as a *thesis*, a principle intrinsically right, might be held as a *hypothesis*, allowable, desirable, and even best in given conditions."⁴

The article appeared in the *Civiltà cattolica* in 1863; it was unsigned, as always until quite recent times, but it is traceable to Father C. M. Curci. He had been present at the famous Malines Congress (August 18–22) of that year, at which Montalembert had made two stirring addresses in defense of Catholic sympathies with the "liberties of the day." Most Catholic writers today admit that Montalembert went too far,⁵ while recognizing the

³ Cf. Lagrange, *Vie de Mgr. Dupanloup*, II, 474–75. On pp. 503–13 will be found extracts from some of the episcopal letters which he received on this occasion from every part of the world.

⁴ "The Catholic Church in Modern Civilization," by E. C. Butler, in Eyre's *European Civilization*, VI, 1405.

⁵ So even Lagrange, *ibid.*, II, 427–28. But if the *Civiltà* article really represents the mind of Rome, Lagrange is unjust in his insinuations of hostility and incomprehension

soundness of his practical outlook. Some, however, are prepared to absolve him altogether, as, for instance, E. Vacandard, who quotes Mgr. d'Hulst (writing in 1891): "A theologian making an impartial analysis of the speeches of 1863 in order to compare them with the documents of the Holy See—the *Quanta cura* of Pius IX and the *Immortale Dei* of Leo XIII—, would be hard put to it, it seems to us, to extract a single statement from these addresses which was in conflict with the Papal teaching."⁶ Nevertheless, the *Quanta cura* and the Syllabus were felt to be a condemnation of his outlook.

In any case, the article in the *Civiltà*,⁷ while critical of certain points, is dominated by admiration for the earnestness and the fully Catholic sentiments of the orator. It is a long article, but the greater part is taken up with the presentation of the famous distinction, by which the writer feels that the division existing among Catholics could be happily healed. But what is chiefly interesting to us is that, after having worked out his theory very clearly, the moment he comes to deal with the concrete situation of the day he applies his distinction not to the Catholic ideal but to that opposed to it, in precisely the same way that Dupanloup was to do.

His argument begins as follows. Free will, human nature, society and its authority are to be regarded in *themselves*, in their intimate essence and according to the Creator's designs, without considering accidental circumstances of individual cases. In such a setting a law which protected the pursuit of error or of evil would be a supremely irrational one—indeed, no law at all. The thesis, he says, considers the rulers and the subjects "according to their intrinsic essence, and according to the order established for both by the Creator, in the double economy of nature and of grace." Concrete objections are due to looking at things "not as they are and ought to be in themselves, but as they become in particular cases."

You may, he says, call the thesis, if you like, "the perfect, normal, ideal state"; yet that does not mean that it is sheerly utopian. It existed in the past, indeed it still exists in Catholic states today. But the thesis gives place to the hypothesis when we consider things not as they should be, but "as they become by the intrusion of accidental circumstances—which are often criminal and always regrettable—in certain countries and nations." Then, in such cases, "the universal maxim, while remaining true in itself, can only be applied in part and in a very imperfect way; at times it cannot be applied

there. So too, one feels, is P. Bernard in the *DTC*, IX, 590, where, after mentioning the delation of the speeches to Rome by various bishops, he adds laconically: "La *Civiltà* fait écho."

⁶ Cf. "Montalembert," *Dict. de connaissances religieuses*, IV, 1119.

⁷ *Civiltà cattolica*, 5th series, VIII (Oct. 2nd, 1863), 129-49.

at all." Suppose a state governed according to the whim of its rulers: then the suggestion of freedom for all will be something which Catholics will welcome, in place of the persecution to which they have been subjected. This will be no more inconsistent than the attitude of a landowner who used to allow no trespassers on his property, but who, being ejected unjustly, would welcome the usurper's permission to squat in some part of it.

It will be noticed how, imperceptibly, the *Civiltà* author's thought is slipping into the second way of considering things. The hypothesis is now a relaxation in the state of things introduced by the sweeping action of the usurper, which thereby implicitly becomes the new thesis. And more than implicitly, for he has just made the supposition of a people amongst whom "things have so degenerated that crime and untruth are accorded that respect which is due to their opposites." Hence his speaking of the improvement of things, when the *Imitation* by à Kempis can be printed at least as freely as the *Vie de Jésus* by Renan. Hence his recording Wiseman's speech at the Congress which contrasted the blessing now enjoyed by the Church in England since it had been freed from the penal laws, with the preceding period of persecution. Hence his recalling what touches him most closely—the seventy years' experience which the Church in Italy has had of revolutionary loss of liberty: "If, to avoid such extremities, one must have recourse to the 'modern liberties,' then let them be welcome; but that is the only title which they can have for admission."

And so to come to his summing up (though we are thus omitting much that is interesting and illuminating): the teaching of the Church can only be properly understood by the distinction between the thesis and the hypothesis (this is the paragraph cited by P. Lecler):

Those liberties, considered as *theses*, i.e., as universal principles governing human nature as it is in itself and as God has ordered it, are absolutely to be condemned, and have been repeatedly condemned by the Popes, and especially by the sixth, seventh, and ninth, who have taken their name from *pietas*. But as *hypotheses*, i.e., as provisions appropriate to the special conditions of this or that people, they can become lawful; and Catholics can adopt (*amare*) and defend them, and will be doing noble and most useful work, if they make use of them, as effectively as they can, in the service of religion and of justice.

This reversal of the meanings attached to thesis and hypothesis has not been underlined here merely in a desire to point out an inconsistency of thought in the *Civiltà* article. It has been noticed rather to bring out what was essential to the writer's thought, and what was predominant in the mind of Leo XIII later on. It should be obvious to us how difficult it then was to weigh all the data calmly. It was natural at that time to consider that the

Church's philosophy and political doctrine has said the last word on man's nature "as it is in itself," and to look upon it not only as true but as the complete truth. But there was in the *Civiltà* writer, as in the Pope later, something stronger than the logic which would have concluded: *therefore* anything which detracts from that "complete truth" in any way must *in all circumstances* be repudiated. Whereas an absolute, ideal, normative truth allows of no mitigations, whatever circumstances arise, there may be "principles" which are half-truths—rules of thumb which, if pushed to their logical conclusions and applied to their limit, must be condemned and repudiated, but which, kept within reasonable bounds, can be adopted wholeheartedly because of the truth that really is in them.

The fact is that there is a Catholic understanding of human nature, of freedom, of the state, and of religions true and false, which ultimately dominates the prescriptions and statements made by the Church, even though the actual formulation of these does not always adequately express it. The Church often is only clearly conscious that such and such a doctrine or practice is certainly evil, that its adoption can only be detrimental to mankind. The Church therefore forbids its adoption by her children and appeals to the world in warning of the danger. The theory condemned may be a new one; the Church may not perhaps have been able as yet to analyze its various elements and fairly apportion the praise or blame due to each. But the danger is urgent, obvious; so the Church gives her reasons as best she can. They are true reasons indeed, but not necessarily wholly adequate to the new theory; they are reasons and truths which will be a sufficient guide for those who hear her voice, to guard against its inherent dangers. The task of analysis will follow, when the fruits of experience have once revealed the potentialities which lay in great part unsuspected.

To turn back now to the distinction between thesis and hypothesis. To apply it to the Catholic doctrine as traditionally formulated would seem in the last analysis to be little better than opportunism: "absolute" principles being "mitigated" because of adverse circumstances. But if the distinction is applied to *false* theories, it is a perfectly legitimate one. A false theory when turned into a universal principle is bound to be bad in a great number of cases, and for that reason must, as such, be repudiated. But if the theory is not fanatically applied, but reserved to meet special circumstances, then maybe it sheds its falseness (which consisted precisely in its universal application), and the truth and goodness that were in it remain, and will work to the good of those concerned.

If one rereads the pertinent Encyclicals carefully, one realizes that their main, their essential purpose was the condemnation of theoretical extrava-

gances, and only as a means to that end was the Catholic outlook formulated. There is no need to hold, then, that this formulation is definitive and final. And if this appears to be rather fine hair-splitting, its importance has always been recognized by the Church, which, even in the definitions of her Councils, does not commit herself finally even to the reasons which she gives for the truth of her definitions. Unless she lays down that the reasons themselves must be believed, she is undisturbed if some of her argumentation is later proved to be defective. What she has defined to be held by all is the conclusion and not the arguments by which she came to it. Non-Catholics, of course, will never understand this, but the Church defines infallibly not by her own power but by the power of the Holy Spirit; and she knows that the Holy Spirit is guaranteed to her when she lays down her teaching, and not necessarily when she is arguing or giving her reasons for that teaching.

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