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BAPTIST

A Sociologist Turns to Theology

GREGORY BAUM

FERNAND DUMONT

Fernand Dumont
A Sociologist Turns to Theology

GREGORY BAUM

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Preface

Gregory Baum is surely one of the most honest, sympathetic, and humble theological thinkers the Catholic Church has been granted over the fifty years since the Second Vatican Council offered its profound challenge to the Church to be “the Church in the World.”

Always committed to thinking with the Church, in the Church, and for the Church, Baum has equally been committed to exploring the universal and the particular call for human beings to become fully human – individually, socially and institutionally. He became one of the Church’s most direct and inclusive explorers of the Gospel imperative to “go out to the whole world.” Baum accepted the imperative as a summons to learn from the world, bring it the spirit of openness and resist its dark side so damaging to human life. With the Second Vatican Council he respected the engagement in the hearts of all genuine seekers.

In this spirit Baum met and came to know the work of Fernand Dumont, a sociologist and philosopher recognized in Quebec as a brilliant public intellectual. Baum acknowledges in his introductory chapter that this meeting was not a case of love at first sight – even though his first sight of Dumont was in connection with the work examined in these pages. Baum acknowledges he had to grow into his appreciation of

Dumont. He tells us how he met Dumont and this work in the doctoral examination of Dumont, who, as a sociologist of accomplishment, had chosen late in his life to seek a doctorate in theology from Laval University. Here is how Baum describes the context:

I was invited to become one of the examiners of his dissertation, yet because his approach to theology was so different from the theology with which I was acquainted, I failed to discover the originality of Dumont's work. When I read *Une foi partagée* [a later Dumont book] in 2011, I instantly realized that the author was a great theologian, an original thinker, a courageous Christian philosopher ready to face the challenges of modernity posed to the Christian Faith. I was now eager to reread his doctoral dissertation, published in 1987 as the book *L'institution de la théologie*.

Baum draws a certain parallel between Dumont's magnum opus and John Henry Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845). Newman's idea of "doctrinal evolution" – so counter to the defensive and fixated spirit of neo-scholastic theology at the time – provided for "a creative process that allowed the Church to develop its teaching while remaining faithful to its original truth." Baum continues: "Dumont's book introduces ideas that reveal the relevance and fecundity of the Gospel in the context created by modern, secular, pluralistic society." Yet, he concludes, "Dumont's book has not yet been received in the Church."

In the present volume Baum reveals Fernand Dumont as a theologian who is historically located. In creating his theology, Dumont never leaves behind his experience as a child of poor working-class parents nor the methodology used in his sociological studies. Consequently his reading of theological meaning is embedded in the dynamics of human engagement – across cultures as well as in the specific realities of a

dynamic Quebec society and its institutions. Quebec prior to the Quiet Revolution; Quebec during the high-water effort to create a distinctive socialist identity for itself as a truly cooperative society in which everyone counted; and contemporary Quebec shaped by a gradual submission to the dominant neo-liberal model of social existence and development. These historical phases, Baum suggests, form not only the backdrop but the very ground or matrix of Dumont's theological reflection. He explores what it means to be a Church faithful to its calling that is genuinely engaged with secular culture, sensitive to its best voices and strivings, and at the same time aware of its destructive potential.

Dumont's phenomenology of human life, Baum argues, is in keeping with Maurice Blondel's understanding of the human drama: people moved by an inner dynamic to seek the good and the true to the very limit, witnessing the pull of a nameless Transcendent in their lives. Man is always more than man, Pascal wrote; Dumont added to this, a society is always more than a society. Society, he holds, is also subject to the pull of the Transcendent.

In his dialogue with contemporary culture Dumont has great respect for persons of conscience, be they atheists, agnostics, or believers, because their commitment, their fidelity to conscience, testifies to the summons of the Transcendent in their lives. Here dialogue leads to mutual understanding and the discovery of common values, making possible cooperation in the service of the common good. Dumont feels at home in the pluralistic society. He is not troubled by people with divergent convictions. What troubles him are people who are unreflective, purely utilitarian and uncommitted. With Blondel, Dumont holds that the nameless Transcendent in people's lives is the God revealed in the Scriptures.

It seems to me that the journey to such dialogue has its conditions: the sharing of the foundational value of each person, believer or unbeliever, each a subject, a centre of knowledge, acknowledging full equality, seeking ever wider

solidarity, and practicing mutuality in discourse and action. I think this requires faith in, commitment to, and need for an affirmation of the freedom of each one to act on her/his best understanding and choices – and not on the prior decision of any group – including the Church. Each person, religious or not, must be accepted as a subject acting by conscience and not by command.

Freedom, equality, solidarity, and full mutuality as pillars of social aspirations are, in fact, modern and contemporary values shaped as much (or more) by secular discovery and practice as by religious inspiration. Even as Dumont critiques individualism, relativism and false absolutes in society, he is led to recognize that the movement promoting the above-mentioned shared convictions in unrelievable social pluralism can ground, for Catholic believers, an enriched, humbled, and faithful interpretation of the constitutive features of their communal and institutional living: faith, truth, revelation, magisterium, and tradition. Dumont's refreshing treatments of these features of the institutional life of the Catholic Church are addressed and unfolded by Baum crisply and with attractive coherence.

Take truth, for example. Truth is seen by Dumont as not merely an intellectual concept or affirmation but as personal understanding grounded in community and in faith. It forms and refines itself in imagining and feeling, in guiding myths, poetry and vision, in figures, models, and metaphors prior to taking expression in concepts. Truth, in Baum's reading of Dumont, is essentially the relevance of concepts and proclamations to actual living.

Affirming the importance of the cultural context in coming to grasp (or be grasped by) the truth could be seen as a superficial acceptance of cultural factors over timeless truths or simply an adaptation of current fashions. This is not what Dumont has in mind when he claims that truth must be relevant to contemporary culture. In his encyclical "The Joy of the Gospel" Pope Francis makes the same claim:

truth needs to be embedded in a living culture to be effective in believing.

There are times when the faithful, listening to completely orthodox language, take away something alien to the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ because that language is alien to their own ways of speaking to and understanding one another. With the holy intent of communicating the truth about God and humanity, we sometimes given them a false god or a human ideal which is not really Christian. In this way, we hold fast to a formulation while failing to convey its substance. (#41)

According to Dumont, as explained by Baum, the Gospel can find expression in terms drawn from different cultures, because biblical truth is more than a series of concepts. Dumont sees the truth of Jesus not only, and not primarily, in what he said, but more especially in what he did. Through his actions, his responses to persons he met, his reactions to challenges and his readiness to suffer, the presence of Jesus evokes in us a conversion of heart and a new grasp of the meaning of life. Inspired by what he said and did, believers find themselves called to freedom from constriction, to transformation from fear to trust, and from primary self-concern to love of others and self-gift.

Because Dumont has reconceived truth in this manner, he is able to offer original interpretations of the mission of theologians, the function of the magisterium, the meaning of Tradition, the place of doctrine in proclamation, and true membership in the Church. Baum shows that in proposing these innovative interpretations Dumont draws upon the faith experiences of the believing community, upon the reading of Scripture by the Fathers and the early Councils, and upon Christian witnesses throughout the ages.

Baum shows that in the sixties and early seventies Dumont supported the Quiet Revolution as a left-leaning social

scientist full of hope, while in the eighties, disturbed by the bureaucratization of society, he feared that Quebec was losing its creative spirit and the rootedness in its own culture. Taking into account his entire work, some readers see Dumont as a progressive thinker with utopian aspirations, while others see him as a conservative thinker attached to the communitarian character of traditional society. Baum offers a progressive reading of Dumont, emphasizing the bold vision he had of the future Church.

In offering English-speaking readers access to Dumont's magnum opus, Baum introduces them to hopeful thinking following a learned theological methodology that is biblically based, attentive to tradition and seeks expression in terms of contemporary culture. Baum's presentation encourages us to follow Dumont in fearlessly doing theology in critical dialogue with culture, willing to learn from its insights and values and ready to detect and denounce its dark side: its idolatry, lies and oppressions. The Gospel challenges the given culture, utters the truth about it, and offers healing. Dumont extends an invitation to those in the Church and those who in conscience remain apart from the Church to come together in open, respectful dialogue and joint action in the service of humanity. In offering this author as a model for doing theology at this time, Gregory Baum has done us a great service.

Jack Costello, SJ
Regis College, Toronto

FERNAND DUMONT

Introducing Fernand Dumont

I discovered the thought of Fernand Dumont late in life. In June 2011 I decided to ask the department of theological studies of Montreal's Concordia University to allow me to teach a graduate course on Catholic theology in French Quebec. While I had been a professor in the religious studies faculty at McGill University, an anglophone institution, I was an active participant in the francophone Church. I joined la Société canadienne de théologie and was a member of the editorial committee of the francophone revue *Relations*, sponsored by the Jesuit Community. Because of my integration into francophone society, I was unhappy that the theological literature produced by French Quebecers was largely unknown in the anglophone theological milieu of North America. That is why I asked to teach a course on the subject.

In preparation for this course I picked up a book I had bought years ago, but had never read, *Une foi partagée* by Fernand Dumont. The book made a great impression on me. I knew who this author was. He had been appointed by the Quebec bishops in 1968 to chair the Commission on the Laity and the Church, later called the Dumont Commission, whose task was to listen to the spiritual aspirations of the Quebec people and propose pastoral policies in support of a Catholicism appropriate for their society. In the 1980s, Fernand Dumont, by that time an admired sociologist at