

Authority in Religion.

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I. AUTHORITY OF CHURCH AND BIBLE.

IT is a strange fact that though men instinctively chafe at authority in the ordinary affairs of life, in religion it is the one thing of all others they most demand. A religion which comes forward with some definite and clear-cut authority, with categorical "thou shalt's" and "thou shalt not's," with a system clearly elaborated, is sure to gain a large following.

This is clearly one of the chief reasons of the popularity of the Roman Church with many minds. It has a definite answer to give to almost every question; it can assure its adherents that, provided they do this and do that, it will do the rest. It is a religion in which authority is developed to the highest degree, and systematized in the most minute fashion. In plain words, it is an easy religion for this very reason.

Just as Continental travel has been facilitated by tourist agencies, by which inconvenience and responsibility is lifted off the shoulders of the individual, who has nothing to do but follow his guide and rely upon his interpreter, so there is always a tendency in religion to create an authority which will in the same way relieve the devotee of the duty of thinking and acting for himself.

It is just in this very direction that the Reformation made its greatest and farthest-reaching reform. The establishment of the principle of the right of private judgment cut at the very root of what might be called the tourist agency system of the Church; for it did not merely defend the right of the individual conscience, but carried with it the responsibility of the individual to exercise the private judgment thus secured to him in ascertaining the truth.

Men were thus thrown back upon themselves, the Church

declining the responsibility of the task ; each man had his soul returned to him, so to speak. But he must have some guide to show the way, some authority to correct and control him. Where was he to look for such a thing ?

Now, it is a generally accepted conclusion that the mere destruction of a belief, however erroneous it may be, is quite indefensible unless there is something more true offered in its place. If the Reformation had merely cut away the authority of the Church and left nothing as an alternative, it would be an indictment against it of the gravest kind. It is not our purpose to inquire what the reformers held to be the final authority in religion, except to remark that the common observation that they put an infallible Book in the place of an infallible Church is not strictly correct. We shall leave out of count the reformers, and inquire what their fundamental principle, the right of private judgment, necessarily and inevitably involved in this direction. As the ultimate outcome of their position, whether recognized by them or not, what became the final authority over faith ?

By an authority we understand "the control of an individual, of his thoughts and activities, by a knowledge larger than his own."¹

It is also necessary to get, first of all, a clear idea of what we mean by belief. A lengthy examination of the question is not possible,² but it will clear the ground somewhat if we can elucidate the main principle underlying it.

The verb *πιστεύειν* "is used in the New Testament of *the conviction and trust* to which a man is impelled by a certain inner and higher prerogative and law of his soul."³ That is to say, belief is the product of the deepest parts of our nature, and is related inseparably with the loftiest and noblest qualities we possess, such as love, trust, hope. It is important to safeguard the word against a misuse which is very common. A mere

¹ Grubb, "Authority and the Light Within," p. 11.

² But *vide* Inge, "Faith and its Psychology."

³ Grimm-Thayer, "Lexicon of New Testament."

acquiescence, non-intelligent and detached from any moral implications, is not belief in the true sense—it is assent. “For this belief, *νομίζειν*, was the regular word in classical Greek, indicating acceptance of statutory beliefs rather than any warmer sentiment.” But belief in Christ among the early Christians, as also among Christians to-day, implied a great deal more than this; it “included moral devotion and self-surrender to Christ, a firm conviction that by uniting themselves to Him they would find remission of sins and eternal salvation, and intellectual conviction that certain Divinely revealed facts are true.”¹

Using the term “belief,” then, in this sense, it follows that we can only believe what we know; for “to know a thing is . . . to bring it into relation with ourselves, with what we already know, with the present content of our own minds”;² and belief, as we have seen, is to bring a fact into the most intimate relation with ourselves. Therefore, belief is an intense form of knowledge.

Furthermore, the only sure ground of knowledge is experience. Without experience knowledge can never be real; it is little better, if any, than assent. I cannot really know that ice is cold except by the evidence of my own experience, and then I know it with such conviction that no arguments could shake the belief.

So, then, we start from the point that we can only believe what we know, and we can only really know that which we experience.

The Protestant Churches are faced by the duty of finding an answer to this crucial question: In what direction can a man look for an authority to control and direct his belief? We have cleared the ground in one way by making clear that real belief is something of the most intimate kind, not the mere assent to theological formulæ, not the mere acquiescence in creeds, but a personal and conscious and heartfelt appreciation of God through

¹ Inge, *op cit.*, pp. 3, 4, 23.

² Illingworth, “Reason and Revelation,” p. 89.

Christ. But though the ground is thus cleared, the question is made much more difficult, for the area of belief is thus extended over the whole of a man's nature and down into the deepest part of his being.

The most popular answer to the question, "What is the authority to govern and control faith?" is—"The Church."

It is quite surprising to note the tenacity with which this view is held by many, and undoubtedly it is partly because there is a certain amount of truth in it.

On examination, this answer really means that not the general congregation, but the ministry itself, is the authority.

The Roman view that the infallible authority rests ultimately in the Pope need not detain us for long. To every impartial reader it is completely discredited;¹ nor has the way of escape from the absurdities of its position devised by Newman been of any permanent value to the Roman Church.

But what is more interesting to us is the position adopted by High Anglicans.

Their theory of the authority of the undivided Church is quite their own, but as a matter of fact the losses involved by its acceptance are in great excess of the gains. It makes the revelation of the Church merely static. By this we mean that "a supernatural revelation was at some time past granted to mankind, which now persists only in its effects."² The Church *did* speak with authority generations ago, but it has long ceased to do so. We are thus anchored fast to the past, and progress and increased enlightenment denied us now.

Bishop Gore's statement of his view leads us to this unsatisfactory result. In his attempt to combat the error of the doctrine of development, he states that "the authority of the Church . . . is the subordinate authority of a witness to the truth, a guardian, a teacher of it; she has no authority to pro-

¹ See, for instance, Martineau, "Seat of Authority," book ii., chap. i., and Salmon, "Infallibility of the Church," lecture xiv., "The Blindness of the Infallible Guide."

² Inge, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

mulgate or reveal new truth.”¹ This really means that the Church has no living authority at all, for it simply performs the office of an ecclesiastical measuring-rod, and we can hardly speak of the authority of a yard measure! With all its dangers, the doctrine of development is preferable to this, for it does recognize the living voice of the Church. The Church, as the blessed company of all faithful people, in whose midst the Spirit of Christ dwells, must have a life and a voice; it cannot have ceased to speak. It may well be that its authoritative pronouncements in the past are adequate for present-day use, but to completely and finally stereotype the expressions of the Church is to deny its vitality and mission to the world of to-day.

Now, when regarded in an ideal light, there is certainly an impressiveness about the authority of the Church: what has been held for truth by everybody, always, and everywhere, must have immense value. But the Vincentian formula is valueless for us now. The Church to-day consists of a number of sections of believers more or less in disagreement, and there is no united voice; and the selection of the branch of the Church upon whose judgment we propose absolutely to rely is an exercise of personal opinion. So it follows, of necessity, that the ultimate authority upon which an individual relies who professes to accept the judgment of a Church is that of his own personal opinion.

But the repudiation of the infallibility of Church authority by the Reformers had a vital and essential principle behind it. The power of the Church had been wielded with deadly effect. Goodness and orthodoxy had become practically interchangeable terms. A “good son of the Church” would be buried with the benedictions of the Church, although he had died with the execrations of his fellow-creatures. Correct thinking, or, even less, assent to orthodox formulæ, was sufficient guarantee of good Churchmanship. Truth was regarded as a parcel made up and put in the charge of the Church, and not as something to be

¹ “Roman Catholic Claims,” ed. 1900, p. 42.

assimilated into the spiritual being, and to find its expression in holy living and Christ-like conduct.¹

Now, we must state with emphasis that the office of creeds is not to test the reality of belief. They exist as a standard of orthodoxy and the authoritative statement of how fundamental truths should be expressed, but their repetition can no more be regarded as a proof of real faith than the recitation of the marriage service would be of the reality of a man's love for his wife.

But grave though the danger may be of confusing goodness with orthodoxy, we must not fall into the opposite error of under-estimating the value of ecclesiastical formulæ.

The Church expresses its authority in creeds and formularies of various kinds. Those creeds and formularies are the outcome of a long process which has been going on for a number of generations. They are really the expressions of the religious experience of vast bodies of Christian people, and, as such, their value as a norm, by which to check and test the views of individuals, is clearly very great, and with considerable justice it can be claimed that variation from that standard should be viewed with grave suspicion. An illustration will make this clearer. The temperature of the blood in the human body is ascertained to be 98·4° F. This result has been arrived at by the process of averaging the temperatures of an immense number of healthy individuals under normal conditions. Consistent variation from 98·4° F. is justly regarded by doctors with suspicion, it is an almost certain indication of disease.

So, making full allowance for the possible misunderstanding of the language of creeds and formularies, and eliminating those articles which do not meet with the general agreement of Christian Churches, we may fairly regard a creed—*i.e.*, the authority of the Church—as a test of great value in determining truth. We would give it an even wider application. When the Church, or a Church, speaks to-day, its authority is not to be lightly regarded. "The Holy Spirit is a present possession

¹ Forsyth, "Principle of Authority," p. 34.

of the Church, and . . . in the unity of the Christian consciousness there is an authority not absolute and final, but real and living, which has its place in correcting the vagaries of individual illumination."¹

When the position is advanced that the Bible is to be regarded as the final authority, it is at once challenged by the supporters of the former theory. It is the Church, they say, which has placed its imprimatur upon the Bible, and the acceptance of the Scriptures as inspired therefore presupposes the infallibility of the authority which has accredited the Scriptures.

Now, there is just enough truth in this to make it a very awkward argument to answer. It must be freely admitted that the Church had no small share in the preservation and safeguarding of the inspired writing, but a careful reading of the history of the Canon fails to disclose any clear consciousness on the part of the Church that it possessed an infallible discriminating power.

So far as the Old Testament is concerned, the Christian Church found the Canon practically completed and authorized before its birth. The questions still under dispute were, curiously enough, settled about the end of the first century A.D., when there appears "to have been some sort of an official declaration by the Jewish Rabbis that finally determined the limits of the Hebrew Canon."² When the Church did use its judgment on the Hebrew writings it was not always correct, for in the third and fourth centuries it commonly quoted and used Apocryphal writings as Scripture, and, so far at any rate as our Church is concerned, that judgment is now repudiated.

As for the New Testament Canon, the best that can be said is that the Church was very long making up its mind as to which were, and which were not, the inspired writings. Books accepted in one Church were rejected by others, the selective process stretched over several centuries, and there is a reluctance

¹ Grubb, "Authority and the Light Within," p. 25.

² Ryle, "Canon of the Old Testament," p. 182.

on the part of the Church as a whole to make up its mind, which is suggestive of inability to do so. One of the best accredited lists of canonical books is the Muratorian Fragment,¹ which Westcott says "may be regarded, on the whole, as a summary of the opinion of the Western Church on the Canon shortly after the middle of the second century."² In this list 1 John, 1 and 2 Peter, James, and Hebrews are omitted, and the Apocalypse of St. Peter given partial acknowledgment. It was not till the Third Council of Carthage, in A.D. 397, that the Church exercised legislative power on this question.

Nor did the Protestant Reformers regard the Scriptures as owing their authority to the ecclesiastical imprimatur. They could hardly do so consistently, for, having rejected the dogma of the infallibility of the Church, they could not with any reason base the authority of Scripture upon an authority which they began by repudiating. "When the Reformed Confessions of Faith enumerate the canonical books according to traditional usage, they are careful to add, without exception, that these books are held and recognized as inspired by God and the norm of the faith, 'not so much because of the unanimous consent of the Church, as in virtue of the inward witness and persuasion of the Holy Spirit, by whom we are made wise to discover and set apart these from other ecclesiastical books.'"³

These remarks are sufficient to prove that it is only with very considerable qualifications that we can allow the common expression: "The Church gave us the Bible." The Old Testament books were already selected for the Church, and the New Testament books won their way by their own intrinsic excellence, and not through any specific ecclesiastical pronouncement. Indeed, the inspired writings were constantly appealed to by the Church as an authority superior to itself; the Old Testament was so regarded by the Apostles, and the New Testament by the Councils.⁴

¹ *Circa* A.D. 170. ² Westcott, "Canon of the New Testament," p. 212.

³ Sabatier, "Religions of Authority," p. 159.

⁴ *Cf.*, for instance, Gelasius, "Hist. Con. Nic.," quoted by Westcott, *op. cit.*, p. 428, "the books of the Evangelists and Apostles and the utterances of the Prophets clearly *instruct us* what we ought to think of the Divine nature."

But though we may be justified in regarding the Scriptures as an authority superior to the Church, our way is not sufficiently cleared to put the Bible in the position of an infallible authority to which every individual can appeal. We must now briefly examine this.

Such an attitude towards Scripture involves four implications :

1. That God did infallibly express Himself to men.
2. That those men infallibly apprehended the revelation given.
3. That the revelation has been infallibly transmitted.
4. That each reader can infallibly interpret it.

Assuming 1 and 2, the third proposition admits of no argument whatever. The existence of the science of Textual Criticism is enough to dispose of it entirely. The fourth proposition is in an equally unhappy position ; it involves the infallibility of the individual ultimately. Individuals vary in interpreting Scriptures so conspicuously that it is unnecessary to labour the obvious deduction. Indeed, the very existence of a commentary is sufficient to prove that the judgment of the individual upon the meaning of Scripture is precarious.

But, having made every allowance for these questions, the fact remains that the Scriptures stand, and must stand, in an unique position. Difficulties remain, corruptions of the text may occur, but, after all, it is generally agreed that the main teaching of the Bible is clear to even the most unscholarly of readers, so much so that even "wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein." In them we can learn the authentic Gospel from Christ and His Apostles.

"The New Testament is the authentic and sincere expression of Christianity in the freshness of its earliest days. It gives us a clear idea of the essence of the Gospel, enables us to discern it with accuracy, and thus to apprehend it in its pristine truth. It is the first link, so to speak, in the Christian tradition ; but because it is the first, this link dominates all that follow. No single Church could give up the Bible thus understood without

cutting itself off from communion with the original source of its life."¹

But the point which requires explanation is, how do the Scriptures operate as an authority?

The authority is that of the Living Christ, who mediates Himself to us through the Scriptures—that is to say, the Bible is not itself the authority, but rather the instrument used by the one and only Authority. As we read, the Divine Spirit takes of the things of Christ, and shows them to us; our understanding is enlightened, deep answers to deep, the sacred truths find us, and as we close the Book we feel we have seen unspeakable things. This is surely what we mean by the inspiration of Scripture, that it inspires us.

So, too, but in a lesser degree, it is with Church authority. We have seen that the Holy Spirit lives within the Church, and always has done so; and that venerable Society which has comprised all those who name the Name of Christ is a witness to truth whose authority we dare not lightly repudiate. But here again it is the authority of Christ, who uses the Church as His instrument, to which we bow, and not to the institution as being potent in itself. It is the Spirit of the Living Christ witnessing to our spirits which we acknowledge and acclaim.

If the exigencies of present-day thought in the criticism of Church and Bible have driven us back to this great truth it is good. "The present criticism of Church and Bible is, on the whole, providential," says Dr. Forsyth.² But we must remember that this is not because tortured and harassed faith, driven out from other refuges, has in desperation fallen back upon this expedient. This and this only ever has been the only ultimate authority for faith, the Living Christ in the heart of the believer.

¹ Sabatier, *op cit.*, p. 248.

² "Principle of Authority," p. 22.

