

Biblical Studies and Roman Catholicism

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'It is well known how the study of Scripture has become more and more widely advocated in the Roman Catholic Church in recent years.'¹ The aim of this paper is to attempt to give an overview of Roman Catholic biblical studies at the present time, and, in the light of this, to examine some questions of ecumenical importance. The paper is based primarily on my own observations during a three-month period in the early summer of 1979, when I lived in the Venerable English College in Rome and attended lectures at the Gregorian University and the Pontifical Biblical Institute. It records also some impressions gained in conversation with teaching staff and students. It will, therefore, tend to have a somewhat different emphasis from a study based primarily on the reading of Catholic authors.

It should also be borne in mind that, in Catholic theology, one may discover a difference between the attitudes and style of teaching encountered in Rome itself, and those found in other centres for Catholic study. In some respects Rome provides a paradigm for theological teaching throughout the Catholic Church. Students are sent from dioceses and orders throughout the world to study in the city, and the teaching staff of the Pontifical Universities and Institutions are likewise multi-national. Obviously, therefore, Roman theology has an international and cross-cultural 'flavour' which other, more local centres cannot hope to possess.

However, some Catholic theologians outside Rome—and doubtless a few in Rome itself—feel that the very immediacy of the presence of the Holy See and its fundamentally conservative bureaucracy—the Holy Office, the Pontifical Biblical Commission and so on—has had a numbing effect on the theological life of the city. 'Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the enduring papal policy has been to encourage national hierarchies and religious orders to send their best seminarians to Rome for their training in the academies there, a policy that goes far in supporting theological inertia in all corners of the world', writes one Catholic theologian from the USA.² While I feel this is an overstatement, there is no doubt that, in the Gregorian University, there is a clear concern for the truth as perceived in the church; thus one is unlikely to come across the almost wildly speculative theology that has appeared at times, in recent years, from some individual Catholic writers and communities in Europe and North America. But, while it may be true to say that in

even the quite recent past theological thought and enterprise has been stifled in Rome, this no longer holds good, at least in the field of biblical studies. Roman biblical studies may be cautious, but it would be more than foolish to suggest that professors such as Frs. Vanni, Vanhoye, de la Potterie, McCarthy, and Dr Soggin (a Waldensian who teaches at the Gregorian University) are suffering from theological inertia.

It is also important to remember that, in ecumenical discussion, Rome cannot be ignored. It is not enough for us to think that we have seen the Roman Catholic Church in its fulness when we have only had contact with it in our own country. Through spending time in Rome, one realizes the importance of the city for Catholics from the whole world, who see it as the earthly centre of their church. One appreciates, too, the influence Rome has through its role as an international centre for theological study.

1 A brief history

Biblical studies were stimulated amongst Roman Catholics from the beginning of the nineteenth century, as they were in the Protestant churches. The rise and development of liberal criticism inevitably had an influence on Catholic scholars during the last century, although this influence was more marked outside Rome itself. Not only was there an examination of individual questions of biblical studies, but a review of the whole foundation of biblical study. There was, for instance, a great debate on the subject of biblical inspiration.³

At the end of the last century many of the more 'liberal' Catholic scholars took encouragement from Leo XIII's encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, issued in 1893.⁴ The encyclical firmly asserted the inspiration of the whole of the Scriptures, and was clear that Scripture cannot disagree with itself, nor with the teaching of the church: ' . . . it is clear that an interpretation should be rejected as wrong and erroneous if it pictures the inspired writers as somehow disagreeing among themselves, or if it opposes the teaching of the Church.' Higher criticism, which the encyclical understood as the judgement of scriptural books by internal criteria, was rejected, as was a rationalistic approach to cognate studies. However, the encyclical gave definite encouragement on some levels to the new wave of biblical scholars: 'The primary (aids to interpretation) are the critical method and the study of ancient Oriental languages.' Furthermore, it was clearly stated that the sacred writers do sometimes use common, human language to describe scientific fact.

However, in the next decade, the church found itself faced by the modernist crisis, finally brought to a head by the writings of Loisy and his fellows, and no 'liberal' biblical scholar felt himself encouraged during the papacy of Pius X (1903-14). In a series of documents issued

by the Holy See in 1907,⁵ the modernists and their theology were roundly condemned. The decree *Lamentabili*, for example, anathematized a long series of modernist propositions, of which the following are typical:

The Church's interpretation of the Sacred Books is certainly not to be despised, but it is subject to the more painstaking judgement and correction of the exegetes.

They who believe that God is truly the author of sacred Scripture manifest excessive simplicity or ignorance.

Divine inspiration does not extend to the whole of sacred Scripture in such a way that it protects each and every part of it from all error.

Continuous additions and corrections were made in the Gospels until a definite Canon was established; hence nothing but a slight uncertain trace of Christ's own teaching remains in the Gospels.

This reaction from the Holy See proved crippling to biblical studies for more than thirty years: not simply because it condemned liberal ideas (we might indeed find ourselves in sympathy with the doctrinal objectives if not with the methods used) but because these decrees gave the impression that biblical scholars were hardly needed. The *magisterium* was quite capable of interpreting the Scriptures correctly without any help from biblical scholars.

Pius X's condemnations were supported during the reign of his successor, Benedict XV. His encyclical, *Spiritus Paraclitus*,⁶ denied that *Providentissimus Deus* allowed the possibility of error when it asserted that the sacred writers 'spoke of natural things according to their external appearance'. This encyclical again refused to see any distinction of inspiration or inerrancy between the 'sacred' and 'profane' parts of Scripture.

The official line remained much the same until 1943 when, under Pius XII, the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* was issued.⁷ If any single event is responsible for the upsurge in Catholic biblical studies over recent years, then credit must be given to this document. In it, Pius XII reversed the trend that had been dominant under his three predecessors. The encyclical clearly encouraged biblical scholarship, vernacular translations of the Scriptures, biblical language study, and textual criticism. Perhaps its most revolutionary emphases were the encouragement of scholars to study from the original biblical languages rather than the Vulgate, and to seek to discover the literal, as well as the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures. The exegete was further encouraged to determine the literary types found in the Scriptures, involving the study of ancient oriental literature. The encyclical succinctly gave the basis on which Catholic biblical scholars were to work: ' . . . so the words of God, expressed in human language, are like human expression in every respect except error.'

This encyclical is without doubt a very important landmark in the history of the advance of biblical studies in Rome. However, it would

be a mistake to assume that its recommendations and new emphases had an immediate practical effect. One priest recalls that, when he was studying at the Gregorian University in the late '40s, the biblical courses (with the exception of a good course on the prophets) were so poor that all he remembers is one of the New Testament professors taking up three lectures in attempting to work out how many Holy Innocents there had been! There was, nevertheless, a steady growth in biblical studies during the late '40s and '50s, including, for instance, increased speculation about the nature of Genesis 1-11. In 1948 the Pontifical Biblical Commission (established by Leo XIII in 1902) gave some guidelines on these particular chapters:

... to declare *a priori* that these narratives do not contain history in the modern sense of the word might easily be understood to mean that they do not contain history in any sense, whereas they do actually relate in simple and figurative language, adapted to the intelligence of less educated men, the fundamental truths underlying the divine plan of salvation. And they are a popular description of the origins of the human race and of the chosen people.⁸

This advice was obviously interpreted in too 'liberal' a fashion in some circles. In the encyclical *Humani Generis*, issued in 1950,⁹ it was denied that the letter questioned the fundamental historicity of Genesis 1-11, and exegetes were called to determine in just what sense the chapters are historical.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission continued to keep a close watch over the slowly developing biblical studies of the '50s. In the early '60s there was again a crisis over the whole question of the admissibility of biblical criticism. The Holy Office issued a *Monitum* in 1961 aimed specifically at liberal New Testament scholarship:

In the praiseworthy and fervent study of the Biblical disciplines in some places thoughts and opinions are being circulated, which call into question the basic (*germanam*) historical and objective truth of sacred Scripture, not only of the Old Testament (as Pope Pius XII has already deplored in his Encyclical *Humani Generis*), but also of the New, and even of the words and deeds of Jesus Christ.

Since, however, thoughts and opinions of this sort make both Pastors and the Christian faithful anxious, the most Eminent Fathers, appointed to watch over the character and teaching of the faith, have decided that all those who deal with the Sacred Books, be it in written work or spoken, should be warned that they should always conduct any argument with due prudence and reverence, and that they should keep before their eyes at all times the doctrine of the Holy Fathers and the opinion and Magisterium of the Church, lest they disturb the conscience of the faithful or do violence to the truths of the faith.

N.B: This *Monitum* is issued with the consent of the most Eminent Fathers of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.¹⁰

The *Monitum* was only the eye of a considerable storm. Professors in the Gregorian University found themselves suspended from lecturing or threatened with such suspension; the *Monitum* was interpreted

by some as an outright rejection of biblical critical studies, in spite of the clear praise of 'Biblical disciplines' in the opening line; biblical scholars felt forced once again to justify their own disciplines and methods.¹¹ One of the senior biblical scholars in Rome, Fr Duncker from the Angelicum, writing in the light of the *Monitum*, criticised form-critical methods when used in a quite rationalistic way, but gently pleaded for a continuation of the work of historical investigation of the Scriptures. The determination of Duncker and others that the slow progress made in biblical studies up to that point should be continued, enabled the biblical movement to survive the crisis of those early years of the '60s. However, progress up to that point had been slow. In a footnote to a lecture delivered in 1963, R.E. Brown complained about the parlous state of biblical studies in the Catholic Church in the USA: ' . . . it is worth recording the sobering thought that there is no full-scale scientific commentary by an American Catholic on a single book of the Bible.'¹² The situation was certainly no better in the City of Peter, since the very proximity of the Holy See perhaps had the effect of retarding growth in Rome even more than in other centres. Progress was therefore leisurely, and was not helped by a less than consistent attitude in official announcements of the papacy—sometimes apparently giving encouragement, and, more often, apparently suffering from a loss of nerve.

2 Vatican II and following

This debate of the early '60s took place during the Second Vatican Council. Without doubt the second really important impetus towards progress in biblical studies came from the council. For the purposes of this article, the council document of most importance is the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*,¹³ but that decree must be read in the light of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.¹⁴

Dei Verbum has had a particularly revitalizing effect on Catholic biblical studies, with its clear emphasis on Scripture as the norm for revelation and tradition:

The Church . . . has always regarded, and continues to regard the Scriptures, taken together with sacred Tradition, as the supreme rule of her faith. For, since they are inspired by God and committed to writing once and for all time, they present God's own word in an unalterable form, and they make the voice of the Holy Spirit sound again and again in the words of the prophets and apostles. It follows that all the preaching of the Church, as indeed the entire Christian religion, should be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture. [para. 21]

While *Dei Verbum* again strongly affirmed the fundamental historicity and unity of the Scriptures, and especially the Gospels (cf. para. 11), it called for a renewed application to historical critical investigation:

In determining the intention of the sacred writers, attention must be paid, *inter alia*, to literary forms, for the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression. Hence the exegete must look for that meaning which the sacred writer, in a determined situation and given the circumstances of his time and culture, intended to express and did in fact express, through the medium of a contemporary literary form. Rightly to understand what the sacred author wanted to affirm in his work, due attention must be paid both to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer, and to the conventions which the people of his time followed in their dealings with one another. [para. 12]

It is said that the original draft of this document was rejected by the assembled bishops as too rigid. The council then asked Cardinal Bea, formerly rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, to prepare for them a brief outline of form-criticism to assist them in redrafting their statement. An *Instructio*, issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission on 21 April 1964,¹⁵ filled in some of the practical details implied by the council. It is a well-balanced, but open document which gives the green light to further development of biblical historical critical studies. After an initial call for charity to be exercised in the judgement of the conclusions of biblical scholars, the *Instructio* says that exegetes *must* make use of modern historical method, whilst remaining true to traditional Catholic method, and being wary of false presuppositions sometimes underlying the use of form-critical methods. Christ 'observed the methods of reasoning and exposition which were in common use at the time',¹⁶ and the disciples 'in their turn interpreted His words and deeds according to the needs of their hearers.'¹⁷ Thus it becomes important to examine the literary forms used, and discover why a particular structure has been created in the Gospel narrative. But this does not mean that the Gospels are 'myth', nor does it affect their historical truth. Professors should see their critical studies as a means to *building up* faith, and preachers and popular authors should be especially aware of the need to preserve sound doctrine. 'If all these instructions are kept, the study of the Sacred Scriptures will rebound to the advantage of the faithful.'¹⁸

Another important council document is the decree *Optatan Totius*¹⁹ on the training of priests, which gives some of the practical details parallel to the dogmatic statements of *Dei Verbum*. The decree calls for a radical revision of theological training, with the provision of an introductory course on the mystery of Christ, and demands 'a most careful training in holy Scripture, which should be the soul, as it were, of all theology.' (para. 16) In dogmatic theology 'biblical themes should have the first place.' (para. 16)

Obviously the statements about Scripture in *Dei Verbum*, *Optatan Totius* and the *Instructio* must be seen in the light of statements about tradition and the church in *Dei Verbum* and, especially in

Lumen Gentium. Dei Verbum was very clear that Scripture must be interpreted in the light of the *magisterium* and tradition:

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it . . . Sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. [para. 10, cf. also paras. 12, 21]

Lumen Gentium reaffirmed the authority of the church, in particular as the church is found in sum in the bishops as a college, and in the person of the Roman Pontiff: 'The whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing that comes from the Holy One, cannot err in matters of faith.' (para. 12) The infallibility of the teaching of the whole college of bishops 'with which the divine Redeemer wished to endow his Church in defining doctrine relating to faith and morals, is co-extensive with the deposit of revelation, which must be religiously guarded and loyally and courageously expounded.' (para. 25) 'The Roman Pontiff . . . enjoys this infallibility by virtue of his office . . . For that reason his definitions are rightly said to be irreformable by their very nature and not by reason of the assent of the Church . . . They are in no way in need of the approval of others, and do not admit of appeal to any other tribunal.' (para. 25) The Roman Pontiff speaks as 'the supreme teacher of the universal Church, in whom the Church's charism of infallibility is present in a singular way.' (para. 25) However, the bishops 'do not admit any new public revelation as pertaining to the divine deposit of the faith.' (para. 25)

3 The present situation

Vatican II is, of course, the controlling influence for the present situation of Catholic biblical studies. This does not mean that Catholic scholars regard it as an end in itself, as Bruce Vawter says: 'What must be recognized now is the need to go still further, that Vatican II marks a beginning and not the culmination of a theological understanding of the nature of biblical truth.'²⁰ In Rome itself one can see very clearly the results of that determination to 'go still further' in the pursuit of the nature of biblical truth. In the early '70s, the courses at the Gregorian University were rearranged comprehensively. Previously there had been no biblical studies course in the first two years of study, which are taken up with philosophy. Now, in accordance with the demands of *Optatum Totius*, students are given a course called *Mysterium Christi*, which provides a general introduction to the biblical revelation and an overview of Scripture. Furthermore, there is generally a certain amount of scriptural study, on a more purely spiritual level, given in the national colleges and religious

houses, the 'houses of formation' for seminarians studying in the city.

In the first cycle of theology (i.e. years 3-5) there is a good deal of scriptural study, with a far greater place now given to biblical studies than before. In addition, fundamental theology courses deal with questions of inspiration, authority and the place of tradition. One student, who has been studying in Rome since 1972 and is now working on a licence in Scripture at the Pontifical Biblical Institute (another three to four years after the first five), pointed out that, although Scripture teaching in the Gregorian did open up remarkably in the early '70s, it is still very much in the process of development, changing all the time. The aim in the first cycle is to give students a basic methodology rather than a full course of information. Because the biblical teaching is still underdeveloped, some Catholic students, notably some from the USA, find it far too primitive and do not bother with it. It would be difficult, however, to criticize the Pontifical Biblical Institute in these terms, with its impressive facilities and teaching staff, and post-graduate students from all over the world.

The new structures are matched by new attitudes. No longer does there appear to be a need to 'protect' students from the Scriptures until they have acquired a 'proper' epistemology.²¹ The professors and scholars at work in the Gregorian University and the Biblical Institute no longer feel hindered by the past. 'Papal decrees on the Bible are to the birds', I was told by one professor, who went on to explain that, in his biblical exegetical work, tradition hardly impinged at all, and, where it did, it was a help and not a hindrance. He feels that the Holy Spirit does not let the church go substantially astray in its exegesis of crucial matters such as the eucharistic presence, or the nature of grace in Romans 5.

And yet, in spite of this new attitude, the biblical scholars of the present day feel that they have a quite different attitude from that of the modernists at the turn of the century, whose loyalty to the tradition and *magisterium* of the church was in doubt. 'Modern Catholic Biblical scholars submit their opinions to the Church's teaching authority, something that was anathema to the modernists', explains R.E. Brown.²² But he goes on to point out the new attitude on the part of the church: 'The Church continues to encourage the Biblical movement . . . Catholic scholars now have "full liberty" in investigating matters touched on by the past decrees of the (Biblical) Commission, except where there is a question of faith or morals.'

This desire on the part of biblical scholars not to separate themselves and their work from the church may be seen in three aspects of the teaching in the *Biblicum* and the Gregorian University which I found particularly impressive. Firstly, there is a real concern to relate the studies to the pastoral concerns of the church, which the students will face in their ministry. Secondly, there is a desire for dialogue

between different theological disciplines: 'New Testament Theology may be impelled by dogmatics to pose its questions to the text in a more nuanced way, while dogmatics may hope for many benefits from a fountainhead of Theology which is authoritative for further development of the faith.'²³ Thirdly, there is a determination not to allow rationalistic presuppositions to underlie the use of historical critical methods. Theology 'cannot take over inconsiderately the post-Kantian ontology which is the recognized basis of modern hermeneutics.'²⁴

Thus, although biblical studies in Rome are still very much in the process of development, there is much by which to be impressed. The *Biblicum* has been responsible for some particularly significant work in the fields of philology, textual criticism, and the structural analysis of Scripture; though some might say that this last is somewhat overplayed by certain professors. It may be that these disciplines are more advanced because they were able to develop without fear of official suspicion, when some other critical disciplines were in danger of being judged 'unsafe'. There is also a commendable atmosphere of concern for Christian truth. Obviously the Gregorian cannot be compared directly with faculties of theology in the secular universities of Western Europe: its character is more that of a theological college or church faculty. And yet those in theological faculties have much to learn from the attitude and outlook of biblical studies in Rome.

4 Scripture and inspiration

Having sketched briefly the history of Roman biblical studies and my own impressions of the present situation, I want now to turn to some specific points of ecumenical interest, and of particular importance to evangelicals. The question of the inspiration of Scripture is one that is undoubtedly on the agenda for discussion in Rome. Vatican II shows a clear acceptance of the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Bible:

Holy Mother Church, relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and the New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21, 3:15-16), they have God as their author, and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.²⁵

This contrasts with more minimalist interpretations in vogue at other times.²⁶

At the same time there is a decided reaction against 'dictation' theories of biblical inspiration that have sometimes been put forward in defence of scriptural truth. The human authorship of Scripture is equally clearly affirmed, together with the need to probe the historical and literary background of the author and his work. We have

already seen how the *Instructio* of 1964 stated that Christ 'observed the methods of reasoning and of exposition that were in common use at the time', and acknowledged that the authors of Scripture selected and arranged material, not in such a way as to affect its historical truth, but so that the structure and framework of a particular book or passage can be examined to see *why* it possesses its peculiar form.

While there is a general reluctance to limit the inspiration of Scripture to some parts only, it appears to be generally accepted that infallibility is limited in matters of historical detail. Thus general (*germanam*) historicity of the Gospels is defended, but not their historical and geographical detail. There is a similar attitude to the historical books of the Old Testament. As a result, Roman scholars tend to occupy the middle ground; whilst there is little extreme liberal biblical scholarship, there is a certain acceptance of the 'assured results of critical scholarship'²⁷ and a general running-down of 'fundamentalists'.

It would appear, therefore, that for Roman Catholics the Scriptures are undoubtedly infallible theologically, but not so historically. This understanding of inspiration also extends to a general acceptance of the *sensus plenior* of Scripture, although not of the full-scale allegorizing of previous eras.²⁸ The valid canonicity of those books assigned by Protestant churches to the Apocrypha is asserted on the grounds of their allegorical nature.

I think that here we have some basis for ecumenical dialogue and agreement. Without doubt evangelicals and Catholics are at one in accepting the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, although there is perhaps a difference in our understanding of the historical trustworthiness of biblical history. So I feel that we have enough common ground for fruitful discussion and mutual challenge on the subject.

Perhaps John Wenham should not have been so quickly and easily maligned when he raised the subject of the inspiration of Scripture as a vital one for ecumenical discussion.²⁹ We might recognize his foresight even more clearly in the light of the recent and welcome revival of the question of inspiration by German Protestant scholars from such radically differing viewpoints as Peter Stuhlmacher and Gerhard Maier.³⁰

5 Scripture and tradition

Without doubt the far bigger ecumenical question concerns the authority of Scripture in relation to that of the tradition or *magisterium* of the church. Vatican II is quite clear that Scripture and tradition are not to be separated: '(The Church) has always regarded, and continues to regard the Scriptures, taken together with sacred Tradition, as the supreme rule of her faith.'³¹ We have already seen how *Lumen Gentium* filled out this with a renewed assertion and definition of the infallibility of the church. The position still generally

put forward is that Scripture and tradition are 'one and the same thing', because they come from the same source of revelation, God. One can distinguish Scripture and tradition, but not separate them. The teaching of the first apostles controls that of the 'apostles' who follow, by means of their direct experience of Christ and their special election. However, it is not possible that the *magisterium* or tradition, in the formal sense of councils and *ex cathedra* statements, can have erred.

One has to ask, however, whether this position is quite as unsusceptible of change as it might appear. In the first place, there is an increased tendency to speak of the church or the 'community of faith', rather than of tradition. The category of tradition is still used—tradition is 'the all-encompassing hermeneutical horizon', says Karl Lehmann,³² but one can detect a change of emphasis in the use of terms. 'The Church is precisely the environment of Scripture', states René Marlé,³³ and one might compare Raymond Brown's assertion that it is no longer possible to contrast 'belief in the Gospels with belief in the Church, for the Gospels themselves came out of the Church.'³⁴ 'To interpret Scripture correctly one must first have one's ecclesiology right', is an oft-repeated maxim in present-day Catholic hermeneutics. This tendency to shift away from tradition to the church is possibly an important development. Can we detect here an attempt to move away from the idea that tradition is a necessary secondary source of revelation, because Scripture is, in itself, inadequate? Julian Charley points out that the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) statement on authority never speaks of tradition in those terms.³⁵ Is there, then, a move away from thinking in terms of the place of a static tradition, to considering rather the role of the *magisterium* of the living church?

There is also an increased emphasis on Scripture as the norm for tradition, for the church's *magisterium*. This is expressed somewhat ambiguously in the ARCIC statement:

The inspired documents . . . came to be accepted by the Church as a normative record of the authentic foundation of the faith. To these the Church has recourse for the inspiration of its life and mission; to these the Church refers its teaching and practice. Through these written words the authority of the Word of God is conveyed. Entrusted with these documents, the Christian community is enabled by the Holy Spirit to live out the gospel and so be led into all truth. [para. 2]

But compare para. 19:

In times of crisis or when fundamental matters of faith are in question, the Church can make judgments, consonant with Scripture, which are authoritative. When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous. Through the Holy Spirit the Church commits itself to those judgments, recognizing that, being faithful to Scripture, and consistent with Tradition, they are by the

same Spirit protected from error. They do not add to the truth but, although not exhaustive, they clarify the Church's understanding of it.

Charley says that this is consonant with the assertion of the Thirty-nine Articles that 'General Councils . . . may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God',³⁶ but it appears rather to be saying that council decisions are somehow invariably, infallibly in accord with Scripture. It leaves unexplored the question of the status of a conciliar decision shown unequivocally not to be in accord with Scripture. There is a similar apparent ambiguity in *Lumen Gentium*, para. 25: 'When the Roman Pontiff, or the body of bishops together with him, define a doctrine, they make the definition in conformity with revelation itself, to which all are bound to adhere and to which they are obliged to submit.' However, we can find here a welcome emphasis on the role of Scripture as normative for the *magisterium* of the church, and one might compare the statement of the professor at the Gregorian University, quoted earlier, that tradition hardly impinges on his work of biblical exegesis.

This emphasis on Scripture as the norm for the *magisterium* is taken further by some Catholics, who point to what they see as an intentional ambiguity in *Lumen Gentium*, deliberately leaving open the question of the relation between Scripture and the church. The one does not control the other, but rather there is an interplay between the two. As a result of such an interplay, some of the traditions current in the church may be changed, and the tradition³⁷, the *magisterium*, reinterpreted for the present day. This emphasis can also be found in the ARCIC statement, para. 15:

All generations and cultures must be helped to understand that the Good News of salvation is also for them. It is not enough for the Church simply to repeat the original apostolic words. It has also prophetically to translate them in order that the hearers in their situation may understand and respond to them. All such restatement must be consonant with the apostolic witness recorded in the Scriptures; for in this witness the preaching and teaching of ministers, and statements of local and universal Councils, have to find their ground and consistency.

6 Towards a hermeneutical consensus

The fundamental ecumenical question involved for us here is, of course, one of hermeneutics. Just how should the individual and the Christian community interpret the Scriptures so as to discover their true meaning? The 'bombshell' that struck Luther and the pioneers of the Reformation was not simply the rediscovery of the truth of the doctrine of justification by faith alone; it was also the discovery that Scripture (*sola scriptura*) could be interpreted over against the tradition, the *magisterium*. In fact, for the Reformers, the teaching of Christ, who demanded that men should not escape the full challenge of the Scriptures by interpreting them through a filter of their own

tradition, made such an interpretation essential. Thus the Reformers developed a hermeneutic that was first biblical—the Bible must be interpreted, as God’s ultimate authority, in the light of itself, its own cultural, historical, grammatical and theological context, it must be its own primary instrument of interpretation, and no text must be interpreted so as to disagree with another—and, secondly, Christological—the primary frame of reference for our hermeneutic must be Christ. Jesus condemned the Jews of his own day because they failed to see him in the Scriptures; their tradition hid the true meaning from them.

The Reformers had, therefore, the means, the primary frame of reference for interpreting the Scriptures without the necessity of appealing to tradition. A further, vital principle for interpretation is that the Holy Spirit is the primary interpreter, taking the Word of God inspired by him, and illuminating and applying it to the individual and to the Christian community. Although the church is the Spirit’s particular sphere of activity, there is the distinct possibility that the church may have sinned, have erred—‘Councils may err’—and thus there will be times when the Spirit has to make the truth clear to an individual or group apart from the mainstream of the established church.

We must, I am convinced, retain this emphasis of the Reformers that Scripture can and must be interpreted ‘over against’ the church and tradition, although we agree gladly that the Spirit has at times caused the church to formulate particular doctrinal statements that have been needed to preserve the truth of the whole Scripture, and to prevent the interpretation of one text in contradiction to another.

The recent concern amongst Catholics that there should be an ‘interplay’ between Scripture and the church seems to demand the possibility that Scripture can be interpreted ‘over against’ the church. In a recent article,³⁸ George T. Montague proposes a scheme for biblical interpretation, one aspect of which is a study of the function of the text, that is, how it has made its impact on a community. This seems to demand the possibility of there being a basic separation (and not simply a distinction) between Scripture and the church on at least one level. In the light of this we might do well to ask our Roman brethren whether they are prepared to admit that the *magisterium*, the tradition, can not only be reinterpreted, but also reformed and changed. At the same time we might ask whether they will admit at least the possibility that councils can err, and that the infallibility of papal statements *ex cathedra* might be subject to God’s own infallible Word.

However, as Protestants we must also acknowledge the work done by the exponents of the new hermeneutic,³⁹ who have made it clear that, for the hermeneutical circle to be complete, there must not only be distancing—seeing the Scripture in the light of its own particular

context—but also a fusion, so that the Word of God might truly challenge us. In other words, we must understand that the work of interpreting the Scriptures is not complete without our own involvement as individuals and as the church. Furthermore, we recognize that the Spirit who completes the work of interpretation and application is the Spirit who is at work in God's living church, although he is never tied down by the church, and at times needs to burst through the dead tradition to recreate the living community through the challenge of God's Word.

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NOTES

- 1 J. W. Charley, *Commentary on the Agreed Statement on Authority* (Grove Books: Nottingham 1977) p 18.
- 2 J. T. Burchaell CSC, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810* (CUP: London 1969) pp 2f.
- 3 *ibid.*, *passim*.
- 4 18 Nov. 1893. In *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* XXVI, pp 269ff.
- 5 cf. in particular the encyclical *Pascendi*, AAS, XL, 59ff; decree *Lamentabili*, AAS, XL, pp 470ff.
- 6 15 Sept. 1920. AAS, XII, pp 385ff.
- 7 30 Sept. 1943. AAS, XXXV, pp 297-325.
- 8 In a letter to the Archbishop of Paris, 16 Jan. 1948.
- 9 12 Aug. 1950. AAS, XLII, pp 568ff.
- 10 20 June 1961. AAS, LIII, p 507 (my translation).
- 11 cf. R. E. Brown SS, 'Our New Approach to the Bible', in *NT Essays* (Geoffrey Chapman: London/Dublin 1965) pp 1ff; P. G. Duncker OP, 'Biblical Criticism', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, XXV:1, Jan. 1963, pp 22-33.
- 12 *op. cit.*, pp 19f(n).
- 13 ET in *Vatican Council II—The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery OP (Scepter Books: Northport, NY 1975) pp 750ff.
- 14 *ibid.*, pp 350ff.
- 15 *CBQ* XXVI:3, July 1964, pp 299-312.
- 16 p 307.
- 17 p 308.
- 18 p 311.
- 19 Flannery, *op. cit.*, pp 707ff.
- 20 *CBQ* XXXI:2, 1969, p 281.
- 21 cf. *Dei Verbum*, para. 22.
- 22 *op. cit.*, p 13.
- 23 A. Vogtle, 'New Testament Theology—Data and Methods', in K. Rahner (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Theology* (Burns & Oates: London 1975) p 1072.
- 24 K. Lehmann, *Hermeneutics*, *ibid.*, p 614.
- 25 *Dei Verbum*, para. 11.
- 26 cf. Burtchaell, *op. cit.*, *passim*.
- 27 cf. Vogtle, *op. cit.*, *passim*.
- 28 cf. R. E. Brown SS, 'The *Sensus Plenior* in the Last Ten Years', *CBQ* XXV:3, pp 262-85.

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- 29 J. W. Wenham, *The Renewal and Unity of the Church of England* (SPCK : London 1972) esp. pp 17ff.
- 30 P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (ET, SPCK : London 1979); G. Maier, *The End of the Historical Critical Method* (Concordia : St Louis 1977).
- 31 *Dei Verbum*, para. 21.
- 32 op. cit., p 615.
- 33 René Marlé, *Introduction to Hermeneutics* (ET Burns and Oates : London 1967).
- 34 'Ecumenism and New Testament Research' in *NT Essays*, p 24.
- 35 Charley, op. cit., p 18.
- 36 ibid., p 21.
- 37 n.b. the difference in Catholic thinking between traditions, the temporary, local, changeable aspects of life of a Christian community, and the permanent, unchangeable tradition—those things that are 'of faith'.
- 38 'Hermeneutics and the Teaching of Scripture', *CBQ* 41 : 1, pp 1-17.
- 39 cf. A. C. Thiselton, 'The New Hermeneutic', in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Paternoster : Exeter 1977) pp 308-33; 'Understanding God's Word Today', in *Obedying Christ in a Changing World*. 1. *The Lord Christ* ed. John Stott (Collins : London 1977) pp 90-122; cf. also *The Nottingham Statement* (Falcon : London 1977) pp 17f.