

BASES FOR CHRISTIAN BELIEF: A PHASE OF THE CATHOLIC-PROTESTANT DIALOGUE

by JAMES PETER

IN April-June, 1963 (p. 68), when referring to Mr. Peter's appointment as Federal Supervisor for Religious Broadcasts for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, we expressed the hope that in spite of the responsibilities of his new post he would still have time to send us occasional contributions. That he has found time for theological study is evident from various publications which have come from him since then—outstandingly his book, "Finding the Historical Jesus", which was reviewed in the *QUARTERLY* for July-September, 1966. We have now received from him the contribution which appears below. The issues he raises are of acute contemporary relevance, especially the relation between Scripture and Tradition (in all the senses which the latter term bears in the Christian vocabulary). Mr. Peter distinguishes various uses of "tradition" according to the classification adopted in 1963 by the W.C.C. Theological Commission on Tradition and Traditions; an alternative classification would distinguish the apostolic tradition, vested with the authority of the Lord, which for us is embodied in Holy Writ, and on the other hand extra-biblical tradition of whatever sort, which must constantly be evaluated by the standard to be found in God's Word written.

TH**ERE** is in the end only one basis for Christian belief, and that is Jesus Christ himself. The contemporary "Catholic-Protestant dialogue" makes evident that what differences there are between Christians relate to the ways in which Jesus and his significance are to be apprehended. Our reference here will be to four of these ways: the scriptures, tradition, faith and reason.

A word needs to be said about the words "Catholic" and "Protestant". They denote not so much denominations as tendencies within all denominations, some being more obviously characterized by one tendency. The difference is that between the Catholic emphasis on the visible continuity of ecclesiastical institutions and the Protestant emphasis on the sovereign Word of God. Put another way, Catholics tend to identify faith and order; Protestants tend to regard order as unimportant.

Today the term "Catholic-Protestant dialogue" carries a more specific reference to the discussions going on between members of the Church of Rome and the rest of us. It is this reference which chiefly underlies the following remarks, though it should be borne

in mind that all Protestant churches (for better and for worse) have their Catholic elements.

I. SCRIPTURES

The place of the scriptures in understanding Jesus and his significance derives from the fact that in them are contained the definitive accounts of what he was and what he did.

While there remain from about the first century some other documents containing references to Jesus, these are very few and their contents negligible. If we are to learn about Jesus, we are dependent upon what his contemporaries, or near-contemporaries, saw fit to preserve; and what they saw fit to preserve is contained in the books which make up the New Testament.

We are not limited here to the four Gospels. These certainly constitute an important part of the New Testament, and indeed together make up almost half of it. They are however not the whole of it, and not even the first parts to be written. Some things relating to the significance of Jesus (such as the form which the earliest preachings of the Gospel took, its bearing upon particular situations, and the manner of living, both as individuals and corporately, appropriate to his followers) find their record in the Acts, the Epistles and the Revelation. All these books were brought together in the canon of the New Testament because Christians long ago recognized them as enshrining the apostles' teaching concerning Jesus and his significance; they continue to have their canonical authority because Christians generally have not disputed this.

The term "scriptures" is used to include books additional to these which emanated from Christian circles; in fact, the majority of the books in the Bible were written before Jesus was born. What place have these? The books of the Old Testament are important for Christians because Jesus himself thought of them as important, referring to them in his teaching and seeing in them the key to the significance of his own life. They are important, too, because they furnish so much information concerning the religious background of the New Testament writers and the terms they employed to express their appreciation of Jesus' significance.

For these reasons, the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments will always be important. In speaking of them as a basis for Christian belief, however, it is necessary to say something of their "inspiration", and of what can be meant when they are referred to as "the Word of God".

When I speak of the "inspiration" of the Bible, I express my

belief that its books were written by people who, in their various situations and with their various qualifications, were influenced by God in their preparation of writings which through subsequent centuries have been singularly used by him as a means of confronting men with his own revelation. "Inspiration" has a double significance. It refers both to what went into the Bible as it was being written and to what comes out of the Bible to this and that individual as he reads it. It is on a person's experience of the latter process that there rests his confidence that the former took place. "Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority" of the scriptures, says the most widely acclaimed Protestant statement on the matter, "is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts".¹

Most Protestants do not consider every word of the Bible (much less, as Burgon maintained in an oft-quoted sermon, "every syllable, every letter of it") to have been inspired in such a way that it is (in Burgon's words again) "all alike the utterance of Him that sitteth upon the Throne—absolute—faultless—unerring—supreme!"² Such a belief raises difficulties not only from the point of view of what went on in the authors' minds but also with regard to the Bible's true place as a basis for Christian belief. That place is to aid the apprehension of Jesus as the supreme revelation of God (to "witness" to it), not to stand in the place of that revelation.

To speak in this way is not to discount the very words of Scripture, or to discourage anyone from paying careful attention to them: there can be no appreciating the spirit of the scriptures unless one takes seriously the letter. What must be safeguarded are the supreme significance of Jesus himself and the freedom of the Spirit to "blow where it listeth" so that, as G. T. Thomson says, "it is not at the disposal of any man or book or other created thing".

¹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter I.* For a short exposition of this, see my article, "The Reformed View of the Scriptures", E.Q., xxxi (1959), pp. 196-204.

² The sermon was preached in 1860. [A moment's reflection will suffice to show that, for example, the speeches of Job and his friends, part and parcel of the inspired record as they are, cannot be described as "none other than the Word of God" (Burgon) in the same sense as (say) the oracles of Isaiah or the teaching of our Lord. Allowance should, of course, be made for the characteristically rhetorical style of Dean Burgon's affirmation, as is done by J. I. Packer in his well-considered comments on the passage in question (*Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, 1958, pp. 179f.). Ed.]

Having said that, I am happy to declare with Thomson that the fact that Reformed theology has such a strong hold upon the Holy Spirit as the so-called subjective principle helps us to appreciate the other fact that verbal inspiration is nearly right and an excellent rule of thumb.³

It is in the "rule of thumb" manner that Protestants speak when they call the Bible "the Word of God". They mean by this that the scriptures are the durable record of the primary witnesses to the Word made flesh.

Among important emphases of the Christian faith rediscovered and given fresh emphasis at the time of the Reformation was this conviction that God, "bearing witness by and with the word", can speak to any man and that (as one of the leaders of the Reformation put it) the ploughboy with the Bible knows more of Christian truth than the Pope without it. Those of this conviction proceeded to declare it and act upon it, reshaping the Church in a manner consonant with its primitive purpose and pattern. Their descendants have continued to insist that a right understanding of Jesus and his significance can be had without recourse to any tradition other than that preserved in the scriptures.

Now that I have uttered the word considered by many to mark the real difference between Catholics and Protestants, it is time to move to our second section.

II. TRADITION

It is commonplace to remark that Catholics rely entirely on tradition while Protestants ignore it. But that is too cavalier a statement, overlooking some important facts—including the ambiguity that attaches to the word "tradition" itself.

One of the commissions which prepared material for the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order advanced a few "working definitions".⁴ To note these is to be reminded of this ambiguity and to be helped in the avoidance of confusion. Here they are:

The term "tradition" (uncapitalized and singular) is the general category which includes both the process of transmission and the substantive content of whatever is transmitted. This "tradition" is a ceaseless activity by means of which the Christian past is renewed in the living present and made available to the open future, or by

³ Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, revised and edited by Ernst Bizer and translated by G. T. Thomson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), p. 26.

⁴ *The Report of the Theological Commission on Tradition and Traditions* (Faith and Order Paper No. 40. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1963), pp. 16-18.

means of which the Christian past is fossilized and betrayed.

The term "traditions" (uncapitalized and plural) denotes the several patterns of traditions by which the several churches, and church families, have come to be distinct and distinguishable one from another.

The term "*the Tradition*" (capitalized and preceded by the emphatic article) denotes the history in and by which all Christians live: it is the living history of all history, gathering up the history of Israel, centring in the history of Jesus Christ, and continuing in the history of the Church *in saecula saeculorum*. To speak in this way is to pass beyond the boundary of critical historiography but, as long as divided and dissimilar Christians are able to recognize and acknowledge each other as Christians, some such concept is a necessary presupposition constituting "a sort of prompter's cue to the most pedestrian historical reconstructions".⁵

With these distinctions in mind, we can say concerning Christians of every denomination that they are concerned to have their way of living conformed to "*the Tradition*", while they consider "traditions" they cherish to be what they are because of more or less pure "tradition". To put the position in these terms (and I cannot see how any denomination could object that this puts its position falsely) is to see how misleading is the generalization, "Catholics rely entirely on tradition while Protestants ignore it".

Protestants' emphasis upon the sole authority of scripture rises from their conviction that everything necessary for salvation and the proper ordering of the Church is contained in the scriptures and that to give an essential place to anything else leads to distortion. The sixteenth-century Reformation turned upon the fact that when Luther and Calvin and the rest sought to have the Church brought closer to "*the Tradition*" (as the scriptures disclosed the apostles' understanding of it) they were obstructed by those holding that there were "traditions" which were equally binding. The sixteenth-century Reformers were not the first to point out that the Church was following traditions derived from the scriptures and traditions derived elsewhere without making clear the relative status of each category: the issues of scripture and tradition had been fairly thoroughly canvassed for some centuries.⁶ A plausible "if" of history is this one: if the sixteenth-century Reformers had not acted as they did, the matter of scripture and tradition would

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ See, for example, G. H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: the Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (London: Burns and Oates [1959]), especially chapters III-V.

have been solved in a satisfactory way without splitting the Church. An equally plausible "if", however, is that if they had not acted as they did, the matter would have been "solved" in an exceedingly unsatisfactory way.

What in fact happened was that in the sixteenth and succeeding centuries those who entered into discussion on these issues lined up on either side of a clearly-marked division, and there was a hardening of positions. For a long time the disputants on both sides considered that the Roman Catholic position had found adequate expression in a decree of the Council of Trent declaring that "unwritten traditions" were to be accorded "equal pious affection and reverence" with the books of the Old and New Testaments.⁷ It has taken the Second Vatican Council to bring into the open the fact that Roman Catholic scholars are divided as to whether this means that revelation has in scripture and tradition "twin sources", or whether they are but one.

It is impossible to anticipate what the final outcome of this discussion will be. Perhaps the only possible outcome is an agreement to differ (for the Church of Rome, like all other denominations, is bound to have within it always both Catholic and Protestant elements). But my remarks have shown that the division between Catholics and Protestants on the matter of tradition is not as wide as has generally been assumed.

In a recent paper I drew attention to the fact that Catholics and Protestants alike acknowledge a vital factor in the ongoing life of the Church, all being anxious to preserve it from fossilized rigidity on the one hand and undisciplined freedom on the other. The Catholic acknowledges this vital factor when he says that tradition is active as well as passive: it is not something that was handed over to the Church long ago and then finished with. The Protestant acknowledges this vital factor when he says that the Church must be continually reformed under the Word of God. I concluded:

There is recognition on both sides of a process never completed.

If this understanding is a right one—of the Church today as of the Church at its beginning—the Church which is *semper eadem* must be *semper reformanda*.⁸

The continuance of the Catholic-Protestant dialogue may bring these issues into clearer perspective and enable all our "traditions" to be lost in "the Tradition".

⁷ Tridentine Decrees, Fourth Session, April, 1546.

⁸ "The Place of Tradition in Reformed Theology", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, xviii (1965), pp. 294-307.

III. REASON

When I speak of "reason", I mean man's faculty of drawing conclusions from data, of forming judgments, of thinking coherently, and so on. It is a faculty all men possess though apparently in some its endowment is in sharper form and in all it is developed through experience and education.

Christians, in common with all men, make use of this faculty in many ways. The continuance of ordered behaviour, and the enjoyment of whatever technological advancements provide for any age, are among the commonly experienced fruits of reason. Christians also enjoy the fruits of reason in their apprehension of religious truth, considering sound argument, right judgment and coherent thought relevant criteria in determining what statements or activities deserve assent. Revelation may be above reason, but on the whole Christians have not believed that revelation will belie reason.

Nonetheless, some Christians have spoken disparagingly of reason, and have rejected outright the idea of it as a basis for belief. This has been due in some instances to a narrowing of the connotation of "reason" in such a way that it is less than the faculty I have been speaking of. But in a number of instances the rejection of reason as a basis for belief has come from people the adequacy of whose conception of reason can no more be doubted than their Christian conviction.

Here, there emerges a difference between Catholics and Protestants which (like others of the differences we have noticed) may turn out to be only a difference of emphasis. Even so, it is important.

Catholic thought retains many features characteristic of the pattern adumbrated by some of the early Fathers and brought to its noblest expression in the thirteenth century at the hands of Thomas Aquinas. Thomism continues to be the philosophy taught in Catholic seminaries.

A leading feature of this philosophy is the supposition that we can pass from our knowledge of sensible entities to a knowledge of non-sensible entities and that, in particular, there is such an analogy of being (*analogia entis*) between man and God that we can derive the nature of the latter from what we know of the former, though we may not use our terms univocally. Knowing what goodness in man is, we can appreciate the goodness (recognizing a more eminent sense) of God; knowing what justice in man is, we can appreciate (again, of course, we apply the term in a more eminent sense) what justice in God is, and so on. There is this sort of continuity between man and God; we can by the exer-

cise of our reason arrive at truths complementary to those given by revelation. (The classical instances of this way of thinking are the five "proofs" of the existence of God.) Thus there arose "natural theology", embracing the knowledge of God to be had by all men who accept what reason has to teach them. From reason to faith, in such a system, is no very great step.

The Reformers rejected the rather intellectualistic notions of faith and revelation (and indeed of God) involved in the Thomist synthesis, and saw faith as personal commitment to revelation. Understanding knowledge of God as given in a personal encounter, they recognized such a discontinuity between man and God as no effort of reason can bridge. Moreover, the Reformers took very seriously the radical nature of sin, recognizing that its corruption extends to man's knowledge; his reason is as corrupt as his will. This fact of "total depravity" the Reformers drew from their recognition that in redemption the whole man (his reason included) is renewed; the extent of man's fall is learned from the height to which he is lifted.

It cannot be denied that Protestants have had their patches of scholasticism, and that a carry-over from Thomism can be discerned in a number of their catechisms and text-books as, for example, in the lists of "attributes" of God which often appear. Nonetheless, with the emphasis on "faith alone", "grace alone" and "total depravity", the notion of an "analogy of being" was sufficiently shaken for its place in Protestant thought to be far from as assured as it had been, and has continued to be, in Catholic thought.

This difference between Catholics and Protestants has a bearing upon the place given to reason as a basis for belief. If you postulate such a continuity between man and God as is involved in the Thomist synthesis, you will consider the findings of reason worthy of a place in your over-all pattern of belief about God. If, on the other hand, you deny such a continuity, you will assert that reason can give no knowledge of God.

None has expressed himself more vehemently on this point than Karl Barth who, amid the measured paragraphs of his scholarly *Church Dogmatics*, includes such outbursts as this:

If Roman Catholic doctrine affirms that reason can know God from the world, in the last resort that is only the necessary answer to the question as put by it . . . The intolerable and unpardonable thing in Roman Catholic theology is that the question is put in this way, that there is this splitting up of the concept of God, and hand in hand with it the abstraction from the real work and activity of God in favour of a general being of God which he has in common with us and all being.

Few will want to express themselves in such forceful terms; but most Protestants will agree that the point from which Barth moves is a correct one:

If there is a real analogy between God and man—an analogy which is a true analogy of being on both sides, an analogy in and with which the knowledge of God will in fact be given—what other analogy can it be than the analogy of being which is posited and created by the work and action of God himself, the analogy which has its actuality from God and from God alone, and therefore in faith and faith alone? ... For where do we ever find in the Bible any other being of God than that of the Subject of his work and action towards man?⁹

Let me now return to the point I made earlier, that all Christians make use of reason in their apprehension of religious truth, and in this connection quote from Emil Brunner:

Faith does not put the reason out of action, but through faith the Word of God takes the reason into its service ("bringing all reason into captivity to the obedience of Christ", 2 Corinthians 10: 5). Rational thought is not abandoned—for faith itself is truly rational thought about God and about life as a whole—but all that is got rid of is the sinful misuse of thought, the illusion of reason. Reason is not annihilated by faith, but it is set free. Just as the believer does not cease to speak—but only ceases to speak in ways that are contrary to the will of God—he does not cease to think, but he begins to think in harmony with God.¹⁰

Given this appreciation of its proper place, Protestants do not in any way come behind Catholics in the exercise of reason. Indeed they allow it much greater freedom of exercise, declaring that in the end each man must be his own judge of right belief. Involved here is the possibility that some individuals will come to conclusions divergent from those drawn by most Christians—a possibility seen by some as the chief weakness of Protestantism, and by others as its chief strength.

This acknowledgment of the individual's freedom does not mean that Protestants are without regard for the Church's councils. They have for these a very high regard, as a glance at any of the classical formularies (to say nothing of present-day "codes" or "books of laws") will show. Nor does it mean that Protestants generally have failed to exercise discipline; they have at times shown rather too much enthusiasm for it. What can be said is that the Protestant temperament tolerates much more readily than the Catholic the questioning of even the most ancient and widely-accepted statements of belief.

⁹ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God* (Vol. II.1 of *Church Dogmatics*, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), pp. 83-84.

¹⁰ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: S.C.M., 1947), p. 429.

One more thing must be said about reason as a basis for belief. No one, Catholic or Protestant, considers that reason alone is sufficient for the knowledge leading to salvation, and no one regards sanctity as dependent on intellectual brilliance.

IV. FAITH

Throughout Protestantism runs the principle of "faith alone". It is by faith, not by any intellectual talent, not by any innate capacity for good, not by any credit gained from good works, not by any virtue conferred through the sacraments, that a man is made acceptable, or justified, with God.

The correlate of "faith alone" is "grace alone". "Faith", says Truman B. Douglass,

is from one standpoint a decision to accept God's mercy as sufficient for one's justification, but this decision can be made only because God has already acted graciously to make it possible . . . Grace is of the nature of God's own action, who reveals the fulness of his righteousness by being merciful. It is not bound by institutions or rites but is always freely available when men are enabled by faith to receive it.¹¹

The difference between Catholic and Protestant thought may be illustrated by reference to the Eucharist. All are agreed that this is a means of grace instituted by Christ himself. The Catholic is very concerned to observe it in the correct manner, and by appropriate rite to prepare the altar and the communicants, consecrate the elements and break the bread and lift the cup, and dispose of the elements in a fitting way. He is also concerned, with his doctrine of transubstantiation, to explain how there is a real presence of Christ in the elements. Protestants also are concerned to observe the Eucharist in the correct manner, but are not nearly so absorbed in the nicety of ritual. Certainly they prepare themselves in worship, set aside the elements in prayer, and repeat the acts of Jesus, but for most of them the idea that there are "valid" or "regular" (set against "invalid" or "irregular") ways of doing so has no significance. There is no great anxiety lest the elements be dropped or spilt, and it is quite common for the unconsumed wine to be emptied down the sink and the unconsumed bread to be put in the garbage tin. They do not attempt to explain the "real presence" or to locate it precisely. Enough for them that they are following the institution, command and example of their Saviour, confident that he will in fact do what his own appointed symbols represent him as doing.

¹¹ *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, M. M. Halverson and A. A. Cohen (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 289.

To the Catholic this attitude appears vague, insecure and even irreverent. The Protestant does not find it so; he considers whatever there is of vagueness to be appropriate for those who walk by faith and not by sight, the substance of things hoped for to be adequate security, and the readiness to throw oneself unreservedly upon God to be the height of reverence. "Faith alone" and "grace alone" have as much relevance in sacramental observance as anywhere.

What I have said concerning the Eucharist can be applied to other conceptions by which Catholics set great store, such as regeneration at Baptism, the gift of the Spirit at Confirmation, the boundaries of the visible Church and the presence of the apostolic succession at ordination. On the part of Protestants there is in regard to all these an apparent unconcern as to what exactly takes place. You will note that I have spoken of "an *apparent* unconcern". Protestants are not without real concern on such matters; their concern is "the glory of God alone", who can act at any time in grace to make something out of nothing.

The Protestant views God's activity as always free and dynamic: he trusts the God who will act when and where it pleases him and whose grace depends not at all on our ideas or our actions. By contrast the Catholic seems to view God's activity as confined within set ways which the Church can both understand and control.

It remains to say that faith is not only a matter of intellect, or of emotion, or of spirit, but an activity involving the whole man. The cry "by faith alone" is not a despairing or an obscurantist one. It is a declaration that, in understanding Jesus and his significance, to commit one's whole being to the truth to be found in him is a necessary condition and, in the end, also a sufficient one. Thus to throw oneself upon God is to be put in a right relationship with the source of all truth and thereby to see scripture, tradition, reason and all the rest in right perspective as bases for Christian belief.

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