

The Authority of the Bible in the Modern Period

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Introduction

The authority of the Bible in the modern period, that is, since the rise of critical historical methods is such an extensive and complex problem that it is clearly impossible to treat it in any detailed manner within the scope of this paper.

The subject is extensive, for it covers a period of almost 170 years of development of Christian thought, both on the Continent and in the English-speaking world. The year 1800, the traditional land mark in the modern era in Protestant thought, is a very convenient and useful starting point for our concern in this paper also. The extensive period, however, can be divided into four sub-periods as follows: The Dominance of Liberalism; Reaction of the Fundamentalists and Mediating Theologians; Reign of Neo-Orthodoxy and Existentialism; and Radical Theologies of the sixties.

Furthermore, only a few dominant thinkers and movements in each of the sub-periods could be treated herein and that too only in a summary form.

The problem is complex because the term 'authority' can be used in very many ways. During the period under review, there have been many and varied claims to the authority of the Bible. Almost every theologian has claimed that he has been concerned that his formulations are '*in accordance with the Scriptures*'. The classical expression of this concern can be found in Karl Barth's dictum that the theologian's task is to inquire 'What we ourselves must say on basis of the Apostles and the Prophets'.¹ But it has not been clear in what way each theologian determines the content and basis of the Biblical authority. Therefore, it is important that first we narrow down our terms of reference in our present study.

The Perspective

The term 'authority' with reference to Scriptures or any body of literature may be used basically in two dimensions.²

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¹ D. H. Kelsey, 'Appeals to Scripture in Theology', *Journal of Religion*, 48 (Jan. 1968), p. 1.

² The initial insight for a two-fold classification comes out of Kelsey's excellent article cited above.

A. Authority as a *property* of the Bible, that is, as an intrinsic quality that the Bible contains within itself, as it were.

B. Authority as a dimension of *relation* to theology and life; that is, the Bible *becomes* an 'authority' when it is determinately related to what is said or done in theology or life.

In the history of Christian thought since 1800, one can observe both types of usages. While those who hold on to A may also hold on to B, those who accept the B dimension of authority need not accept the first, A.

Authority as an *intrinsic property*, position A, may be claimed by a Christian for the Bible by referring to one of the following:

(A-i) The Bible as an objectively inspired document by God. Whatever be the mode of divine inspiration, whether verbal, propositional or plenary, since God has inspired the writing, the handing down and canonising of the Scriptures, it has an intrinsic and an objective authority.

(A-ii) The Bible as the *locus* of the Word. Since the Word of God, Jesus Christ, is present in the words of the Bible, the words have an intrinsic authority as property.

The authority of the Bible in its relational dimension can also be used in two general and distinctly different ways.

(B-i) It can be used in a relational way as one of the factors or the only factor by which the theologian *understands himself*, his world and God. We shall call this, the *illuminating relational authority*. The Bible is authoritative only in as far as it influences and helps to shape the Christian's self-understanding.

(B-ii) Secondly, the Bible can be authoritative in so far as a Christian relates to it to *validate* his argument, using it as his supportive datum or warrant.

In the following discussion, we shall find that in each period one or the other of the two dimensions of biblical authority specified above becomes dominant. It is my thesis that by and large there is an onward thrust towards more and more of the first aspect of the second type of authority (B-i), namely, the illuminating relational authority in the course of the past 170 years, and also that perhaps it is the most relevant and meaningful option for us today. Now let us turn to a discussion of the understanding of Biblical authority in various sub-periods of our era.

1. *The Period of Liberalism*

The tremendous change in the understanding of the authority of the Bible that came about in the period of liberal theological domination, starting from the turn of the 18th century to the first decade of the 20th century, is due to many causes. The following discussion identifies a few of them. But our main concern is to assess the varied approaches to the problem of the authority of the Bible.

(i) *The rise of Historical Criticism and Challenge to A-i*

The single most influential movement in this period is that of historical criticism.³ Towards the end of the 18th century, on the heels of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, Lessing, Herder and Eichhorn had composed analyses of the Bible. The shifting of the study of the Bible from the Church to schools and universities of secular nature boosted the interest in a historical critical approach to the Bible.⁴ Kant and Hegel also influenced the trend. Through all these factors, and through a genuine and romantic sense of freedom, the way for impartial objective research into the historical backgrounds of the Bible was opened up.

This research resulted in the critical historical method becoming almost the only *legitimate* method for biblical exegesis. In certain cases, critical method was simply identified with exegesis. As a result, first, the hitherto unchallenged presupposition that revelation was contained in the inerrant propositions written down in the Bible by authors who were directly inspired by God was rejected. Both in Germany, and through its influence in England, it was argued that the Scriptures must be approached in the same way as any other piece of literature. In the words of Bishop E. Law of Carlisle, the Bible must be approached 'with the same freedom that we do, and find we must do, with every other book we desire to understand'.⁵

Secondly, Hegelian dialectics led to a whole new understanding of the development of ideas and propositions. F. C. Baur, a thorough-going Hegelian and founder of the Tubingen School, as well as his students, approached biblical history and ideas with the method of dialectical process. They held that ideas came to their complete expression only gradually through the *conscious setting forth* of thesis, antithesis and their resolution in a synthesis. This led the early Tubingen scholars to deny both A-i and A-ii. Therefore, any possibility of direct inspiration from outside or any supernatural activity of God was rejected. References to Christology, soteriology and miracles for example were considered as 'unhistorical accretions made by the Early Church' from the neighbouring mystery cults.⁶

Hermann Gunkel, the pioneer explorer of the historico-religious interpretation of the O.T. attempted to demonstrate that many biblical narratives, for example the idea of the beginning and end of time, were from the extra-biblical legends of the Ancient Mediterranean peoples rather than direct inspirations from God.

³ Though historical criticism did not originate only in the period under consideration, it was in the late 18th century the stage was set in Germany for full-fledged historical criticism.

⁴ H. F. Hutson, 'Some Factors In the Rise of New Testament Criticism', *Journal of Religion*, 22 (Jan. 1942), pp. 89 ff.

⁵ Quoted in H. D. Mac Donald, *Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study 1860-1960*, (London, Allen and Unwin, 1963), p. 102.

⁶ A. M. Ramsey, 'Authority of the Bible' in *Peake's Commentary On the Bible*, eds. H. H. Rowley and Black. (London, Nelson, 1962), p. 6.

Thirdly, through E. Troeltsch, the historical-religious school became very *relativistic*. For him, 'to be historical and relative is identical'⁷, and therefore, whatever is historical cannot be absolute. This implied that Christianity and its historical expressions, including the Bible and the process of the Canon, are purely relative historical phenomena, and as such they are all subject to the *principle of causality*. The words of the Bible could not therefore be *timeless truth* addressed from outside to the world at large and for all time. This led to the understanding of the Bible as a part of the religious literature of mankind and Jesus as one of the most unique religious leaders.

Thus, the rise of the historico-critical school first challenged and then rejected the idea of the authority of the Bible as A-i and A-ii. In what way then did the early liberals find the scriptural authority? At least for some it was based upon immediate religious experience. Herein a tendency towards dimension B can be seen.

(ii) *Authority of the Bible and Religious Experience*

F. Schleiermacher, the Father of Liberal Theology, insisted that the basis of authentic religion is not doctrine nor confession whether in the form of Scriptures or Creeds but the immediate religious experience of the divine. No external authority of purely objective revelation delivered at a given time in history could become normative. As A. G. Hebert says, 'Thus the view of the Bible having the term *religious experience* for its key word came to be widely accepted'⁸.

This implied again a rejection of A-i, or at least of the absolute and exclusive authority of the Scriptures, and opened up the possibility of listening to God through other literatures based upon religious experience. Lichtenberger expresses this trend in exaggerated language.

'The holy books have become the Bible in virtue of their own power, but they do not forbid any other book from being or becoming a Bible in its turn.'⁹

This attitude was gaining ground also in Britain as it is manifested in the epoch-making volume 'Essays and Reviews', published in 1860.

Secondly, the traditional identification of the Bible with the Word of God was also rejected. As B. E. Meland observes, after Schleiermacher,

⁷ O. W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*, (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1966). VI, II, p. 253.

⁸ A. G. Hebert, *Authority of the Old Testament*, (London, Faber, 1947), p. 33.

⁹ R. M. Grant, *A short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, (New York Macmillan, 1963), p. 155.

'Ritschlian theology, while it continued the emphasis upon feeling and experience which had characterised the thought of Schleiermacher, narrowed the appeal to a *specific object* within the Christian tradition. The object was the *person* of the historic Jesus. Accordingly, the appeal to Christ, or more particularly, the appeal to the immediate experience of the person of Christ, replaced the appeal to experience, based upon the *sense of dependence*.¹⁰

This natural move of liberal theology from religious experience in general to the immediate experience of Christ in particular furthered the attack on mere identification of the Scripture and the Word of God, Jesus Christ Himself. As such, it is a move away from A-ii and towards B-i. In England, the essayists in *Essays and Reviews* openly attempted to break the popular biblicism of the time and to attack the 'evils (that) have flowed to the people of England, otherwise free enough . . . from an extreme and too exclusive Scripturalism'.¹¹ This they did by categorically affirming that 'the Word of God is contained in the Scripture, whence it does not follow that it is co-extensive with it'.¹²

Thirdly, the liberal insistence upon religious experience coupled with its characteristic openness to the pluralism of the day made it more difficult for the liberals to make a qualitative distinction between the Scriptures and other inspired works. Schleiermacher in *Christian Faith* conceded,

'It becomes difficult to avoid a widened application of the idea, to the effect every original ideal which arises in the soul whether for action or for a work of art . . . may be regarded as *revelation* . . . Indeed it would be difficult to draw any clear dividing line at all between what is revealed and what comes to light through inspiration in a *natural way*.'¹³

(iii) *Scientific Concept of Evolution*

Though in the beginning of the 19th century science was an avowed opponent of the Bible, by the middle of the century it became a useful servant in Biblical criticism in the hands of the liberal theologians. Within a short period after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, in 1859, the theory of evolution was accepted and

¹⁰ Quoted in McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 177, fn. 2.

¹¹ G. W. H. Lampe, 'The Bible Since the Rise of Critical Study' in D. Nineham, Ed. *Church's Use of the Bible: Past and Present* (London, SPCK, 1963), p. 127.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Christian Faith*, Vol. II, (New York, Harper and Row, 1963), p. 51 (Italics added)

used in the study of religion and the Bible. The notion of an evolutionary progress of religious and moral ideas among the Jews was uncritically accepted.

As a consequence, the Bible itself became a record of the progressive growth of human religious consciousness. This meant that the later the period in the history of Israel, the more inspired were the narratives. For example, the canonical prophets who spoke of the love, holiness and justice of God were said to be inspired, whereas the primitive ideas had no inspiration whatsoever. This led to the idea of degrees of inspiration within and without the Bible, and hence many liberals found some portions of the Scriptures more authoritative than the others.

Secondly, evolutionary theory, far more than historical criticism, challenged the truth-claims for various accounts in the Bible such as the Genesis story of creation and the Fall. Therefore, theologians began to accept that biblical statements were not infallibly revealed truths but human interpretations of the world around them for theological and aetiological purposes.

(iv) *Man's moral consciousness and the Jesus of History*

Most liberal theologians, influenced by Kantian and later Ritschlian moral consciousness, approached the Bible as *evidence* for the historical evolution of the moral awareness in man 'from a primitive religiosity, through the moralistic religion of the prophets, up to Jesus, the great teacher and master'.¹⁴ The Bible is not the 'Word of God' with authority as its intrinsic property. But its highest portions evidence and validate man's moral awareness and inspire a new morality, love of God and forgiveness. In Jesus, however, the highest point of authority was evidenced. Many of the Liberals held that Judaic-apocalyptic and hellenistic influences began to colour and twist the true image of the historical Jesus within a few decades, and the whole process was retrogressive. Hence Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels and the New Testament as a whole, could not be the true historical Jesus at all. This conclusion called the Liberals to reconstruct the Jesus of history. The liberal picture of Jesus given by Harnack, Wrede and others stands as a clear sign that the Liberals misused the understanding of the authority of Scripture that we have represented as B-ii.

As Reid observes, 'whenever this is done, only parts of the scripture have any present-day meaning. . . . One does not, on this view, interpret; one selects'.¹⁵ The Jesus of Harnack's *What Is Christianity* is a product of reductionism and selection.

Through the whole period of liberal movement, as we have observed, there was an attempt to reject the idea of Biblical authority as property in the sense of both A-i and A-ii. There was a move from an authority based upon mere religious experience with which they started, to base it more on the *person*, Jesus Himself. The Bible becomes authoritative

¹⁴ J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (London, Methuen & Co., 1957), p. 143.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

to the extent that it enlightened and quickened man's experience of Jesus, and to the extent that it validated the liberal understanding of man. This was a *beginning* of a move toward B-ii. But their Kantian and Hegelian presuppositions were not adequate to lead them towards a full expression of B-i or B-ii.

2. *Reactions of the Fundamentalists and the Early Mediating Theologians*

Both in Germany and in the English-speaking world, the liberal attitude to the Bible was challenged by groups of fundamentalists and those who took a mediating position.

(i) *The Fundamentalists' reaction:* The attack of the fundamentalists on the liberal attitude to the Bible was long and sustained. A. H. Sayce vehemently opposed the historical method itself, saying that the term 'higher criticism' was an unfortunate one and that it had only the appearance of pretentiousness and that it had conscious and dubious presuppositions behind it.¹⁶ Baxter, J. Smith, Bishop Wilberforce, were some of the leaders of the conservative reactionaries in England. Their attack on the liberals was on three grounds:

- (a) That the liberals ascribe authority to only portions of the Bible.
- (b) that the liberal view fails to do justice to the divine reality, and to things that caused the Bible to be written, and preserved it through a Canon.
- (c) that its attitude to biblical authority is founded on arbitrary presuppositions of its own, and dubious philosophies of the era.

As an alternative they re-emphasised biblical authority as a property: A-i. This was based upon a rigorous doctrine of the verbal inspiration and therefore the inerrancy of the Scriptures. God is the author of the Scriptures, every part of it. Men are involved only as his organs and instruments. Hence the Bible shares in the authority which is proper to God, its author.

But in the first decade of the 20th century men like Warfield, Orr, and Moule, authors of a series of Tracts called *Fundamentals*, modified this position and said,

'It is not what the Scripture actually says that is inerrant and infallible, but what God intends the Scripture to say to us. The meaning which God, as the true author of the Scriptures, intends to convey to us is apprehended only when through the illumination of the Holy Spirit we discern the deep symbolic truth beneath the literal sense of the words'.¹⁷

Thus the authority of the Bible was lifted from the literal words, to the divine intention. Since Scripture is the focus of God's intention, the Word, (however deep beneath the outward words it may be), the Bible shares in the objective authority as its property: A-ii.

¹⁶ McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

¹⁷ Source not traceable.

It is a pity, however, that even 60 years after the Tractarian Fundamentalists, many conservatives still attempt to base the authority of the Bible purely on the dogma of infallible texts. J. D. Smart speaks of a volume *Revelation and the Bible*, recently edited by C. F. H. Henry, wherein the dogma of the infallible authority of the text is advocated. He also refers to a recently organised 'Evangelical Theological Association' which requires of its members only that they agree or affirm the infallibility of Scripture and thereby its infallible authority as a property.¹⁸

(ii) *The Early Mediating Theologians and the birth of the idea of Salvation History*

The early mediating theologians both in Germany and in England questioned the liberal attitude to Biblical authority based merely on the 'inspired religious consciousness'. The liberal notions of degrees of authority of the different parts of the Scriptures and that of a progressive revelation were also questioned. But they were prepared to use the available historical-critical method.

In general, the mediating theologians position could be described at A-ii. For they tended to uphold the inspiration of the writers and the possibility of spiritual exegesis. The authority of the Scripture was, for some of them, to be found in that fact the Bible truthfully recorded the divine revelatory acts in men and history as a whole. Therefore, the words of the Bible contained the truth of revelation in them. But the context of such a revelation is the whole redemptive history of God's people. As R. M. Grant points out, the idea of *Heilsgeschichte* first originates in the mediating theologians of Tübingen. J. T. Beck of Tübingen, in his reaction against the Tübingen liberals, insisted that the Bible contained the truth of the 'history of salvation'.¹⁹ As such, Scripture is qualitatively different from any other historical work and therefore required different kind of treatment. The authority of the Bible should also be seen as unique and intrinsic for it contains the truth of revelation of God in the special history of God's people and that of his saving events.

In brief, the fundamentalist reaction is a reaffirmation of pre-critical understanding of the biblical authority merely as intrinsic property because of infallible inspiration. The early mediating Theologians through their openness to historical criticism tended toward A-ii.

(iii) *Neo-Orthodoxy, Existentialism and British Biblical Scholars*

The first half of the 20th Century saw a great revival in the discussion of the authority of the Bible. Three groups of theologians have played vital roles in the renewed debate on biblical authority: The new-orthodox theologians, existentialists and a group of British Bible-scholars. We shall briefly consider the contribution of three

¹⁸ J. D. Smart, 'The Interpretation of Scripture', (London, SCM, 1961), p. 214.

¹⁹ R. M. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

individuals, one from each of the above mentioned groups: we choose Karl Barth, Bultmann and C. H. Dodd, since they have offered the most significant contributions to the discussion.

Before identifying the specific contribution of any one of them, it might be in order to make some general comments about the background. Both through the impact of the new science of depth psychology and through the personalistic philosophy of Martin Buber, there came about a revolution in epistemology. This revolution has taught us that personal knowledge is a matter of an I-Thou relationship and subject-to-subject encounter and not a matter of objective intellectual, critical knowledge. This had a tremendous impact upon theology with respect to doctrines of religious knowledge and revelation. Revelation is no longer understood as the communication of an objective body of truth but rather God as a subject encountering and communicating himself to man. John Baillie, discussing this monumental change in religious knowledge, says,

'properly speaking, revelation has place only within the relationship of person to person'.²⁰

Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament says,

'revelation is not the communication of supernatural knowledge and not the stimulation of numinous feelings but is quite essentially the *action* of Yahweh His offering of Himself in fellowship'.²¹

This basic insight is shared by all the three men and hence we hear about theology of encounter, theology of Christ, etc. Now we turn to Karl Barth.

(i) Karl Barth

Barth's understanding of the authority of the Bible is dependent upon his doctrine of revelation with his dialectical method. He states that God cannot be known by reason as an object and that he can be known only by an I-Thou encounter. Such a personal knowledge which is born out of God encountering man and offering Himself to him cannot be in verbal or propositional form, nor can it be analysed or classified as mere 'religious experience'.

(a) By means of the doctrine of revelation as subject-to-subject encounter, Barth can negate a static authority of the Bible as its essential property, A-i. For him, Scripture is the *occasion* on which the true event of the Word of God occurs. Bible being the *occasion* it can be scrutinised by historical criticism and as all human works or like all historical records, it is also open to investigation. He asks,

'Why and wherein does the Biblical witness possess authority? Precisely in this, that it *claims no authority* at all for itself, that its witness consists in allowing that Other Thing to be itself.'

²⁰ John Baillie, *Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*, (New York, Columbia, U. P., 1956). p. 25.

²¹ Quoted by J. Baillie, *op. cit.*, pp. 34, 35.

He goes on to warn us

'Hence we do the Bible a misdirected honour and one unwelcome to itself, if we directly identify it with this Other Thing; the revelation itself'.²²

In this statement it is clear that Barth does not fall into the notion of Authority as seen in A-ii either.

(b) However, for Barth the Bible as the written form of the occasion wherein the Word meets man has an authoritative role. The Word 'waits for us in the words of prophets and apostles'. Therefore, the Bible has a unique authority which far exceeds that of any later tradition controlled by the Church.

(c) While 'these writings, as God's Word in human words expound themselves . . .', 'this self expounding clarity is realised *only* as the reader becomes actively involved in the services of exposition'.²³ This does indicate that the Bible in itself has no static authority but its authority is in *relation* to its becoming the moment of the reader's encounter with the Word. Is this not a move toward the understanding of Biblical authority as seen in B-1?

For Barth, in standing before the Bible we do not stand before authority itself. Rather we stand before that in which, as we hear it, we hear God himself speaking. 'The authority of Holy Scripture is not a possession of Holy Scripture. . . . Holy Scripture is authoritative because God Himself takes it and speaks through it'.²⁴

(d) However, Barth does refuse to admit the competence of historical critical method to go 'behind' the text to explore the historical authenticity of the words of the text itself seen as a part of the canon and hence as normative for Christian doctrine.²⁵

(e) Treating the Bible as *witness* to God's revelation, Barth again calls for a distinction between the witness and the revelation; moreover, he is able to see it as the chief among the human witnesses, and the difference and uniqueness is in its theme, Jesus Christ, and in the quality of the 'special men . . . who confront us in what they wrote'; Scripture thus has the unique priority. Scripture does not deny that there are other witnesses.

But what one cannot understand in Barth is how he can conclude that as the *original* witness to God's revelation and as the 'historically oldest document', the Bible also *is* 'the word of God itself'.²⁶ To suppose that originality makes the Bible the present Word of God is

²² *Ibid.*

²³ P. Schilling, *Contemporary Continental Theologians*, (London, S.C.M. 66), p. 28.

²⁴ J. K. S. Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁶ *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I: Part 2 (Edinburgh, T. and T. Clarke, 1956), p. 557. Besides, Barth's occasional 'take it or leave it' approach to the Scriptures leaves one wondering whether he has really freed himself from an uncritical *revelational positivism*.

falling back into Orthodoxy and perhaps against the purpose of Scripture itself. One wonders whether Barth has not fully guarded himself against a possible understanding of his position as A-ii.

(f) Finally Barth also understands the authority of Scripture in the sense of B-ii. David Kelsey demonstrates that Barth uses the Scripture to *validate* and *authorise* his theological conclusions'.²⁷

Thus we find Barth rejects A-i and by and large is against A-ii, though occasionally he seems to make the simple identification of the Scriptures and the Word of God. By his insistence on the Bible as the *occasion* wherein the event, Word, occurs, he formulates the authority in the sense of B-i. He affirms, through very skilful use, the validating relational authority: B-ii.

(g) This validating authority is seen in terms of Barth's Christology. Along with the Reformers, Barth also identifies a unified single theme in the Scripture and it is Jesus Christ. His Christology offers the material principle.

(ii) *Bultmann and Existentialism*

The contribution of the existentialist school, specially that of Bultmann, Tillich, Fuchs and Buri to the modern understanding of Biblical authority is very significant. Herein we shall concern ourselves only with the work of Bultmann.

Bultmann is making use of the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger in his presentation of the Christian faith for he is convinced that there is a remarkable relationship and sympathy between the understanding of the human self in Existentialism and in the Bible. The basic concern of existential philosophy is to 'develop in suitable concepts the understanding of existence that is given with human existence'.²⁸

Bultmann's approach to the Bible therefore starts with *Fragestellung*, the putting of the question, man's question inquiring about something that is of concern to his own existence. Bultmann tells us that when he goes to the Bible, the question to which he is seeking the answer is the question of human self existence.²⁹ Then this self understanding (that arises out of the *Fragestellung* being addressed to the Bible) is expressed in a coherent system of meaningful categories (the *Begrifflichkeit*). The new system of categories given to us in existentialism replaces old categories of the natural world and gives us 'existentials' applicable to human existence.

(a) This leads Bultmann to understand revelation basically as 'an occurrence that puts me in a new situation as a self', opening up 'what is hidden which is absolutely necessary and decisive for man if he is to achieve . . . authenticity'.³⁰

²⁷ D. Kelsey, *op. cit.*, pp. 11 ff.

²⁸ Quoted in J. Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology* (N. Y., Harper, 1955), p. 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁰ R. Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (New York, Meridian Books 1960), p. 59.

(b) The New Testament not only tells us what the revelation is, but also 'that it is'.⁸¹ In other words it is the New Testament that puts us in the line of revelation, which is an occurrence. Like Barth, Bultmann also sees that the Bible is the occasion in which the event of revelation can occur. Hence, Bultmann's primary interest in the Bible is not for the *was* (whatness) of revelation, but rather the *das* (that) of it.

(c) But this occurrence is not part of human life; rather, it 'breaks in upon it from outside'. When applying this to the Bible, a phenomenon *within* human life, the Bible is not revelation, but in and through it revelation occurs from outside. This is a rejection of biblical authority both in the sense of A-i and A-ii. The Bible therefore in itself as a historical document is useless for true self-understanding through revelation. Therefore, all tools of historical research (including that of demythologising) should be employed. But the purpose is to 'hear the Scriptures as the Word of God . . . which is addressed to me, as a kerygma; it is an event which happens here and now'.⁸² Elsewhere he adds that the 'Bible *becomes* for me a word addressed personally to me, which not only informs me about existence in general but gives me real existence'.⁸³

Thus the Bible *becomes* God's Word, authoritative in so far as it is addressed to him to illuminate and shape his existence into an authentic one. This is an affirmation of B-i.

(d) This does not mean Bultmann falls into a thoroughgoing subjectivism that may lead him to read whatever his existential situation demands from the Bible. No! it is here that his concepts of *kerygma* and the *Word* become important. *Kerygma* is the *event* in which 'God's Word hidden in the Scriptures' comes alive as a proclamation addressed particularly to me in my situation. It is therefore an act of God in which the *Word* comes alive and encounters me. At the same time it does mean that 'the fact that the word of the Scriptures is God's Word cannot be demonstrated objectively'.⁸⁴

(e) Since the N.T. is a document of history, through critical and historical investigations, one can reconstruct a picture of primitive Christianity but this approach can have no meaning for the present. Therefore, the authoritative use of the Bible can come only when it becomes 'an expression of an understanding of human existence which for the man of today also is a possibility for the understanding of himself'.⁸⁵ Because of this, for Bultmann, the task of New Testament theology itself is 'to make clear this believing self-understanding of man in reference to the kerygma'.⁸⁶

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁸² Quoted in Bowden and Richmond (Ed.), *A Reader in Contemporary Theology*, (London, S.C.M., 1967), p. 45.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸⁵ R. Bultmann, *Theology of New Testament* (New York, Scribners, 1955), Vol. II, p. 251.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

(f) For Bultmann 'Scripture is important to theological arguments only to the extent it provides the paradigmatic instances of expressions of faith's 'self understanding'.³⁷ But Bultmann also uses Scripture to *validate* and to back up his theological conclusions. However, the usage is mainly as paradigmatic instances of men of faith in the past.

To sum up, while Bultmann rejects the A-i and A-ii understanding of Biblical authority, he consistently uses it as illuminating relational authority: B-i. Occasionally he also understands it as 'validating relational authority'.

(iii) C. H. Dodd

Prof. Dodd has been chosen because of his own contribution and because of his representative position of many of the British scholars till the 60s of this century. The most important contribution of Dodd to our problem is in his *The Authority of the Bible*.

(a) Dodd takes the biblical critical tools very seriously and believes that the use of the Bible as a dogmatic authority has been adequately challenged by criticisms. Criticism has shown that the Bible 'merely' mediates the Word of God and that its decisive value is discovered in one's religious Experience. Therefore, as a reviewer has rightly remarked 'one who is seeking in the Bible an external and infallible authority will get little comfort from Prof. Dodd'.³⁸ Dodd clearly and categorically rejects any objective authority of the Bible as an intrinsic property or as based upon its infallible character through identifying it with the Word of God.

(b) On the contrary, Dodd can affirm that 'the criterion lies within ourselves in the response of our spirit to the Spirit that utters itself in the Scriptures'.³⁹ 'The inner witness of the Holy Spirit', of which the Reformers spoke, he adds, 'is in effect the 'subjective' criterion of which we are speaking'.⁴⁰ In the Preface he clearly bases the measure of any authority of the Bible upon 'its direct religious value, open to discovery in experience'.⁴¹ Almost at the close of the book he contends

'All through our study it has been clear that anything we can say about revelation is relative to the minds that receive it. Nowhere is the truth given in such purely "objective" form that we can find a *self-subsistent* external authority.'

(c) But Dodd's calling for the 'reception' of the reader or for 'discovery in experience' is towards something much more than a mere private and individual apprehension. For he points out that 'a religious man is not one who has some private 'experience', 'but one who takes all life in a religious way'. Elsewhere, he says, 'the Scriptures . . . are the authoritative record of the act of God by which He

³⁷ C. H. Dodd, *Authority of the Bible*, (New York, Harper and Row, Rud. Edn., 1960), p. 8 ff.

³⁸ Quoted in McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

³⁹ Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁴¹ *Bible Today* (Cambridge, C.U.P., 1946), p. 8.

established relations between Himself and the Church as the people of God, the terms upon which that status is granted and the obligation it entails'.

This implies that for Dodd that individual who is called to experience 'the values' and authority of the bible is one within the Church and one whose existence is formulated in terms of the tradition.

(d) Therefore, it may not be proper to describe Dodd's concept of biblical authority purely as 'subjective'. Its authority lies at the intersection of the divinely guided objective events in history as recorded in the scriptures and the subjective appropriation of a divinely illumined mind that is sustained by the community of faith. He calls this the two fold process and herein his position is very similar to that of William Temple's understanding of revelation in his *Nature, Man and God*.⁴² Temple argues that it is wrong to confuse the authority of revelation with that of its medium. The true nature of revelation entirely prevents the authority from being decisive for any person other than the one who participates in the disclosure. The medium is authoritative in so far as it evokes the apprehension in the believer.

(e) Dodd is very critical of the liberal understanding of the idea of progressive revelation and that of 'degrees of authority'. But he refers to the importance of the continuity and growth of tradition through the ongoing experience of the people of God. Tradition is here understood as transmission which creates the necessary context for the authentic religious experience of revelation today. Progressive revelation is a notion that, rightly understood, shows us a whole process of reception and transmission of divine revelation through succession of events and in broad lines of development within which there are conflicts and cross currents. Hence to understand and interpret the data of the Bible 'we need to have the whole process before us'.⁴³

4. *Biblical Authority and Radical Theologies*

Among those who are called the radical theologians of our time, in particular since 1960, Bishop J. A. T. Robinson is the only biblical scholar. It is not wrong to say that almost all others are more concerned about the meaning of faith in the contemporary world than about the place and authority of the Bible as a formative factor of faith. Even Bishop Robinson, in his radical writings, has not much to say about the role of the Bible. Therefore, it is very difficult to make any systematic analysis of their position.

(i) *The Theologians of the Linguistic Analytical Tradition*

Both Bishop Ian Ramsey and Fred Ferré have made some contributions to the discussion of our problem.

(a) For the linguistic analysts the 'Bible', like the 'laws of nature', has no objective validity but is a useful guide to living and an expression

⁴² W. Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London, Macmillan, 1940), Ch. XII, and XIII.

⁴³ C. H. Dodd, *Authority of the Bible*, p. 229 f.

of self-commitment and decision. Any biblical statement of any doctrine, for example, the biblical affirmation of God as creator, is only a *self-involving* acknowledgement of one's creaturely status or one's experience of dependence. Fred Ferré says that the authoritative role of the Bible is not in its objective explanation of reality as such but rather in its provision of a total-life orientation in terms of an object of ultimate concern and devotion.⁴⁴

For Bishop Ramsey, it is only within the context of commitment and a disclosure situation that the Biblical statement could become meaningful.⁴⁵

(b) The functional analysts of our time say that the religious propositions of the Bible are neither true or false in themselves. But when they function as 'assertions to announce allegiance' to a person Jesus Christ or as 'providing a new mode of existence,' or as 'expression and evaluation of worship and commitment', then they are meaningful and authoritative.⁴⁶

As such the theologians with the linguistic analytical bent will reject A-i and A-ii; while they accept the Biblical authority to validate one's statement about one's experience and commitment, it cannot be used as validating argument about 'reality', as B-ii. This means the closest dimension of Biblical authority that they could get to is B-i, the illuminating relational authority.

(ii) *Death of God Theologians and other Radicals*

(a) The concern of most of the radicals is not being in accordance with the Bible at all. In a sense the radical theologians who is estranged from God and who affirms his death is also alienated from the Bible. William Hamilton brings this out clearly when he says:

'The theologian is alienated from the Bible, just as he is alienated from God and the Church. This alienation may not last. If it doesn't last, fine. If it does last, the theologian will have some piercing questions to ask of himself'.⁴⁷

(b) Bishop Robinson, who started his career as a New Testament Professor, uses historical criticism to demonstrate that the Bible can have no relevance unless through critical study and processes, such as demythologisation, we are enabled to approach it from where we are as modern men. He claims that the Bible may and must be understood from within the world view that characterizes modern man's innermost thought.

Secondly, for Robinson as for C. H. Dodd, biblical authority can be found only in the context of experience. For 'the revelation discloses itself as the depth and meaning of relationship'.⁴⁸ To ask men

⁴⁴ Fred Ferré, *Language Logic and God*, (New York, Harper, 1961).

⁴⁵ I. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, (New York, Macmillan).

⁴⁶ I. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, (Prentice Hall, Englewood, 1966), pp: 244 ff.

⁴⁷ Quoted in J. C. Cooper, *The Roots of Radical Theology*, London (Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), p. 135.

⁴⁸ J. A. T. Robinson, *The New Reformation* (London, S.C.M. 1965), p. 40.

to believe in the biblical message as authoritative 'before they see it for themselves as the definition of their experience and the depth of their relationship, is to ask what to this generation, with its schooling in an empirical approach to everything, seems increasingly hollow'.⁴⁹

(c) Others, in particular theologians of the 'secular', do not find any objective authority in the Bible, nor do they use it for illuminating their self-understanding. But they do not hesitate to use various concepts of the Bible to warrant and to validate their theological conclusions. At times their handling of the biblical material is very naïve without any serious research through historical-critical methods.

Conclusion

Our study has shown that, except for some of the radical theologians of the 1960s, almost all theologians have accepted that the Bible is authoritative in some sense or other. We have also seen that their very different understandings of Biblical authority can be grouped within two basic aspects: the dimension of authority as *intrinsic* property, and the dimension of authority in *relational* terms. It has also become evident that since 1800 A.D. there has been increasingly greater challenge to Biblical authority in the A-i sense.

The claim of absolute and sole authority in doctrinal matters in Protestant Churches is a dubious and dangerous one. It is dubious because if one is honest, one has to accept that the ultimate authority for Protestants is not and never has been *Scripture alone*, but Scripture as interpreted in the tradition of their denomination or school of thought. The Report of the 4th World Conference of Faith and Order, (Montreal 1963) brings out this point quite clearly.⁵⁰ It is also dubious, for it is a claim to have a 'direct access' to the Bible, ignoring two thousand and more years of history of interpretation. Even the affirmation that 'this much is the Bible and no more' is part of the tradition of the Church. A concept of the Bible apart from the tradition that limited it through a canon is a myth, and therefore to claim any absolute and objective authority for the Bible is dubious.

It is also dangerous because it denies the fact that authority belongs only to God and turns the Christian Faith into a 'religion of a book'. Authority is personal and relational. It can never be attributed to a book.

Our discussion has also shown us that, in the course of Christian thought since 1800, there is a growing affirmation of the type of authority identified in this paper as *illuminating relational authority*. I submit for our discussion the proposal that it is this understanding of biblical authority that is relevant and meaningful in our context in India today. On the one hand it will be akin to the general Indian religious attitude to the Scriptures and to the earlier Christian heritage expressed in the writings of men like Chenchiah. On the other hand, it will save us from the reductionistic tendencies seen in men like Chakkarai, in his attitude to the Old Testament, for example.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ London, S.C.M. 1964, pp. 53 f.

The biblical books have a special place, a special dignity and certainly a chronological priority over later texts dealing with the same material. But all these alike have value only as instrumental and mediating agents of the revelation of God. In a sense therefore, the category *importance* may be more appropriate today with reference to the Bible than the much misused and misunderstood term *authority*. This concept of 'importance' is from a contemporary philosophical school, namely the Whiteheadian Process School, and it has been very successfully used as a concept to expound the 'finality of Christ' by Norman Pittenger.⁵¹ It will be worthwhile to explore whether it could bring out the Christian concerns of biblical decisiveness to modern man.

In Whiteheadian Philosophy, an occasion is said to be important when

'It occurs *within a continuing process* of events, provides illumination of what has *gone before*, speaks to us *now* with a special impressiveness, and offers new ways of understanding what is happening in *consequent history*.'⁵²

Importance, in Whiteheadian thought, is a category that refers to the impressiveness and decisiveness of an event or occasion that (a) illuminates what has happened in the past; (b) offers a 'particular stance' or perspective to understand what goes on now in the present; (c) provides new opportunity and possibilities for the future; and (d) can be understood only in the context of a continuing process of events; and it can never be seen in itself, in isolation from a whole range of events.

We are drawn to an event and we are brought to respond to it, because 'it possesses a compelling quality that demands our attention'. This understanding of importance involves on the one hand an affirmation of *objectivity* of the event in its evoking an understanding and response in those who come in contact with it; on the other hand it also affirms an element of *subjectivity*, in that, apart from our active response to the event, it cannot serve its function. Hence, in a discussion of the importance of an event, the hearer's historical situation and personal values are also taken seriously. Importance, when applied to a person or an event, simultaneously affirms both the objective and decisive impressiveness of the entity concerned and the subjective response apart from which 'the impressiveness' has no functional value.

All that has been said about an event can also be said about the Bible. I submit therefore that the word *importance* in the sense described above is more adequate to express the contemporary understanding of the decisive role of the Bible for modern man than the word *authority*.

For the word 'authority' does signify a kind of intrinsic power to constrain belief and as such does not provide adequate room for free personal response. If divine revelation 'has place only within the

⁵¹ *Christology Reconsidered*, (London, S.C.M., 1970).

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 100 (Italics mine). Also see A. N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, (New York, Free Press, 1968 edn), pp. 1-19.

relationship of person to person', then there can be no objective constraining of belief within a personal mode of God's self-giving love. Moreover, the concept of authority as applied to the Bible has often betrayed various questionable presuppositions. For example, it implies the presupposition that any statement or statements can objectively *contain* 'truth' for all time. As Gordon Kaufmann puts it, 'A historical being simply does not have available some "absolute" truth, self-identical for all time and eternity'.⁵³ Nor can a historically conditioned book be a mere 'receptacle' of universal truth. The concept of authority also seems to suggest a kind of 'power over us as something external to our own personality'. As Wheeler Robinson suggests, the Bible or Church can have power 'not until they are freely admitted to (one's) inner citadel of the will'; and only then 'they are transformed into the self-evidencing presence of God'.⁵⁴ Also the word 'authority' has an exclusive connotation of limiting the decisive self-giving of God only to the Bible, and, as a consequence, often the Bible is not seen as a part of an ongoing process of divine self-revelation, the living tradition of God's activity among *all* his people.

It is in this context that I propose that the word *importance*, (when used with caution and with the content briefly indicated above put into it) can properly express the genuine concerns of the older concept of authority without leading into the danger of reducing the Bible into a coercive instrument that externally constrains belief.

It is conceded that the development of the concept of importance as an alternate to that of authority is yet to be done. Yet it is obvious that Process thought offers this pregnant category for a contemporary understanding of the decisiveness of the Bible for us today.

⁵³ G. Kaufmann, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*, (New York, Scribners, 1968), p. 329.

⁵⁴ H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*, (London, Collins, 1962 Fontana edn.), p. 94.