

The Authority of Scripture in the Modern Period: Roman Catholic Developments

L. LEGRAND*

The problem of the authority of Scripture is not new in the Roman Catholic Church. Every generation has put it in its own way, in view of the concrete problems it had to face. The Council of Trent and the theologians of the Counter-Reformation attempted to situate the authority of the Bible with regard to the correlated problems of Tradition and of the Church. In the 17th century, the dawn of the Enlightenment brought face to face the authority of the Bible and that of Reason. A pioneer of Biblical criticism, the French Oratorian Richard Simon, wrote in 1678:

One should not challenge reason and experience under the pretext of inspiration. Men have been God's instruments. Prophets as they are, they are men all the same.¹

A century before Eichhorn, he laid the foundations of Biblical criticism by recognising that 'the diversity of styles to be found in the books of Moses seems to show that the same writer cannot be their author'.² But he was too much in advance on his times. Fiercely attacked by Bishop Bossuet, he was condemned by the royal Council of State, expelled from his religious congregation and his books were forbidden in France. Fundamentalism won the day but the loss was to the Church, which in the following century found itself unable to meet the challenge of the Philosophers and Encyclopedists.

In the 19th century, the authority of the Bible is confronted with that of science. This was not a new problem. There had already been the crises of Galileo and Copernicus. At that time, ecclesiastical conservatism had been strong enough to silence the questioning minds. This was no longer possible in 1859 when Charles Darwin published his work *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. Catholic theologians as well as others had to reconsider what they expected to find in the Bible. Among many others, Newman devoted much thought to it:

* Fr. Legrand is Professor of Sacred Scripture at St Peter's Seminary, Bangalore.

¹ *Lettre A. Monsieur l'abbé P. D. et P. en Th., touchant l'inspiration des livres sacres*, Rotterdam, 1687, p. 3 (quoted in J. Steinmann, *Richard Simon et les Origines de l'Exegese Biblique*, Paris-Bruges 1960, p. 209).

² *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament*, Paris, 1678, p. 39 (quoted in J. Steinmann, *op. cit.*, p. 101).

Over a span of 45 years, John Newman had had the biblical question put to him three times, and his method in each encounter was the same: somehow to disengage the Word, the divine element, from its human integument. In 1838-45 he did this by calling it an *Idea*, hidden beneath the scattered, unsystematic expressions, and gradually clarifying itself with time in the mind of the Church. In 1861-63 the Word was called an *aspect* of Scripture, a respect; it is that face of Writ which looks towards faith and morals. In 1884 the Word had at last become materially separable as those *portions* of the Book that treat of faith or morals. Newman's thoughts gradually worked themselves round to a theory of partial inspiration.³

The theologians whom the Encyclical *Pascendi* (1907) was to categorize and condemn as 'modernists' went further. For them Revelation does not consist in the communication of statements. It is the work of the Spirit

in and with the spirit of man, whereby the material furnished by the workings of the human mind in its endeavour to cope with heavenly truths is continually refined and corrected through Divine inspiration into closer conformity with spiritual realities. There is no material so poor and gross but God can weave of it a clinging web delicate enough to reveal this or that neglected detail of truth's contour.⁴

or in other words

Inspiration means the progressive spiritualizing and refining of those gross embodiments in which man expresses his own ideas and sentiments about God.⁵

For Loisy, the inspiration of the Bible amounts even to less: it means simply that the Bible is a witness to the historical process of an evolutionary faith:

In fact, it is possible to look upon the Bible no longer as a rule or rather the permanent source of faith, but as a historical document, where the origins and the ancient development of religion can be discovered, a testimony which permits us to understand the state of belief in a certain epoch, which presents it in writings of that same date and that same character.⁶

The excessive views of the modernists produced the reaction expressed in the Encyclical *Pascendi*, the decree *Lamentabili* (1907)

³ J. T. Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810*, Cambridge, 1969, p. 79. Cf. J. Seynaeve, *Cardinal's Newman's Doctrine on Holy Scripture*, Louvain, 1953.

⁴ G. Tyrell, *Oil and Wine*, London, 1907, p. 75.

⁵ Letter of Tyrell to von Hügel, 3 Jan. 1902, in George Tyrell's *Letters*, ed. M. D. Petre, London, p. 28, p. 80.

⁶ A. Loisy, *Autour d'un petit Livre*, Paris, 1903, pp. 50-51.

and the too dogmatic verdicts of the first decree of the Biblical Commission (set up in 1902). Modernism brought also discredit on the better-inspired efforts of Von Hügel, Lagrange, Hummelauer and others. There were again dark days for the Bible scholars. Eventually the work of reflection went on and finally met with the encouragement and approval of the Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII (1943) and lately of the Vatican II *Decree on Divine Revelation*.

Thus a continuous (even if somewhat tumultuous) dialogue has been going on between traditional faith in the Inspiration of the Scriptures and the questions raised by the development of human thinking. This dialogue has produced a wild proliferation of theories on the nature of Inspiration and of Revelation. A survey of these theories has been made by J. T. Burtchaell.⁷ Reading his book shows that, beneath the appearance of a monolithic adhesion to the traditional belief in the Inspiration of the Bible, there has been a lot of heart-searching, often to the form of hair-splitting, among Roman Catholic theologians. To this day, Roman Catholic theology has remained faithful to the word Inspiration. But, when closing Burtchaell's study, the reader is left wondering whether, at the hands of the theologians, the traditional notion of Inspiration too has not undergone 'the death of a thousand qualifications'.

Rather than attempting to follow the meandering course of these theories it may be more useful to survey the main issues which currently exercise theological reflection.

The anthropological dimension of the Bible

The result of a hundred years of reflection on the Bible can be reviewed at a glance by comparing the pronouncements of the two Vatican Councils.

The first Vatican Council (1870) describes Biblical inspiration in the following way:

These (books) the Church holds to be sacred and canonical, not because, having been carefully composed by mere human industry, they were afterwards approved by her authority . . . but because, having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God for their author and have been delivered as such to the Church herself.⁸

Almost exactly a hundred years afterwards, the Second Vatican Council resumes the same words literally but it goes on to say:

In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.⁹

⁷ *op. cit.*, cf. n. 3 above.

⁸ Session III, ch. 2. We quote the translation of J. Neuner-H. Roos, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, Ranchi, 1966, p. 60.

⁹ *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 11. Translation of W. M. Abbott and J. Gallagher, *The Documents of Vatican II*, London-Dublin, 1966, pp. 118-119.

A long paragraph follows which, closely following the Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* draws the conclusions of this doctrine. Since 'in Sacred Scripture God speaks through men in human fashion', it follows that access to the divine intention will be through a human meaning and this meaning is to be searched in the light of everything that may condition a human expression. As in the case of the Incarnation, one could speak of a kenotic conception of Inspiration.

This reflection on the human dimension of the Bible has been continued beyond the lines reached by Vatican II. J. McKenzie and K. Rahner particularly have developed what the former calls *the social character of Inspiration*. Remarking that in a number of cases the authorship of biblical books cannot be pinpointed on an individual author and that in biblical days the composition of a book was not the individualistic affair it is nowadays¹⁰, he concludes that 'in some sense Israel and the Church must be conceived as the real authors of the Bible'¹¹ and that inspiration must be conceived as widely diffused in God's people.

K. Rahner takes the same question from a theological standpoint. The Scriptures are an essential element of the life of the Apostolic Church. Therefore God's authorship of the Bible is nothing but his 'authorship' of the Apostolic Church considered from the standpoint of this particularly important element which the Scriptures constitute:

In creating through his absolute will (a will that determined in advance the elements of the history of salvation), the Apostolic Church and her constitutive elements; God wills and creates the Scriptures in such a way that he becomes their inspiring originator, their author The inspiration of the Scriptures is simply God's causality in the Church as defined by that particular constitutive element which is the Bible.¹²

This is a far cry from the idea of an inspiration-dictation. The authority of the Scriptures does not fall directly from heaven. It enters into dialogue with human agents. It assumes the kenotic appearance of a human society limited in extension and in vision, historically conditioned by its setting like any other human society.

The truth of the Bible

Another shift is apparent in the doctrine of Vatican II on the authority of the Scriptures, from the notion of *inerrancy* to that of the *truth* of the Bible.

¹⁰ J. L. McKenzie, *The Social Character of Inspiration*, in CBQ XXIV, 1962, pp. 115-124, reprinted in *Myths and Realities: Studies in Biblical Theology*, London, 1963, pp. 59-69.

¹¹ J. L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London, 1968, p. 392.

¹² The translation given here is that of L. J. Topel, Rahner and McKenzie on the Social Theory of Inspiration, in *Scripture* XVI, 1964, p. 39 and not that of the official English translation of Rahner's book which is less complete (*Inspiration in the Bible*, Edinburgh-London, 1961, pp. 50-51).

A cross section among the standard Introductions to Scripture and the Roman documents anterior to Vatican II would betray an overwhelming concern for the inerrancy. Thus the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893):

So far is it from being possible that any error should underlie the divine inspiration that such inspiration of itself not only excludes all error, but excludes and rejects it as necessarily as it is of necessity that God, the supreme truth, be the author of absolutely no error.¹³

The tilt from 'God the supreme truth' to the rejection of 'any error' is significant. Theoretically and practically the Bible had to be shown to be immune from any kind of error, a defensive attitude which ultimately was both unconvincing and tactically unsound.

Vatican II takes a more positive approach:

Since everything asserted by the inspired authors must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.¹⁴

The background and the implications of this text have already been described by J. Pathrapankal in a previous conference of our Society.¹⁵ There is no need to go over it again.

But on this point also post-conciliar developments have taken place. Particularly important is the study of O. Loretz.¹⁶ The author takes his cue from the text of Vatican I quoted above and goes on to remark that the truth of the Bible is not the Greek conceptual truth but the Hebrew dynamic and voluntaristic one. Whereas the Greek *aletheia* consists in the conformity between the concept and the object, the Hebrew *'emeth* is basically faithfulness. The divine truth, in Biblical language, means God's fidelity to his promises.

Since the truth of God is manifested in his faithfulness to his covenant people, Scripture could only be charged with error if God broke his faith with Israel. . . . Scripture can only be accused of lying when Israel is annihilated.¹⁶

Already N. Lohfink had proposed similar views when stressing that the truth of the Bible is christocentric. It is in its totality and in its relation to the New Testament that the Bible is true. Christ is the truth of the Bible.¹⁷

¹³ Roos-Neuner, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹⁴ *Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 12.

¹⁵ The Problem of 'History' in the Gospels in the Light of the Vatican's Constitution on 'Divine Revelation', in *IJR*, XVI, 1967, p. 95.

¹⁶ O. Loretz, *The Truth of the Bible*, London, 1968, p. 89.

¹⁷ The Inerrancy and the Truth of the Bible, in *Th. Digest*, 1963, pp. 31-42.

In different language we have here an outlook on Scripture which evokes parallel views in Barth and Bultmann. The authority of the Bible is not vested in the literality of words but in the Word, in the message that challenges mankind. And Christ is this Word.

Hermeneutics

Christ the truth of the Scriptures is a hermeneutical proposition. From St Paul onwards the hermeneutic problem of the Christian meaning of the Scriptures has been repeatedly studied and discussed.¹⁸

As for the 'New Hermeneutic', i.e., the actualisation of the Scriptural message by a reflection on the dynamics of language, it is a late-comer in Catholic thinking. The cause may be that the Catholic tradition did not feel so keenly the urgency to find the significance of the Word since anyway its message was relayed by the Church. Now Catholic theologians are making up for lost time.¹⁹

At this juncture, the distinction between Protestant and Catholic research disappears. The same problem is now tackled by the same methods in the same congresses. In this respect, we could mention particularly the Symposia organised yearly by the Institute of Philosophical Studies of Rome, bringing together philosophers and theologians to discuss such topics as Myth and Faith, The Hermeneutic of Religious Freedom, the Analysis of Religious Language, and Infallibility.²⁰ In France, the Protestant P. Ricoeur is the philosophical brain behind the effort of Catholic exegetes to assess the impact of linguistic and structural analysis on their methods.²¹

This contact with the problems raised by the New Hermeneutic has not gone without generating a certain amount of Bultmannian or post-Bultmannian fever. There is a good deal of more or less enlightened popularisation on demythologizing. At a more professional level, the latest book of X. Leon-Dufour on the Resurrection²² has stirred up in French-speaking countries controversies similar to those raised by Marsen in Germany a few years earlier (including a Declaration of the Bishops' Conference).

The Non-Christian Scripture

Finally mention should be made of a question which in India particularly tends to become a *cause celebre* in Roman Catholic circles,

¹⁸ For a general survey of the question and bibliography, see R. E. Brown, *Hermeneutics*, in *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. by R. E. Brown, J. Fitzmyer and R. Murphy, London, 1968, Vol. 2, pp. 605-623.

¹⁹ A few recent studies: R. Marle, *Introduction to Hermeneutics*, London, 1967; W. Joest, F. Mussner, etc., *Was heisst Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift?* Ratisbon, 1966; H. C  zelles, *Ecriture, Parole et Esprit*, Paris, 1970.

²⁰ The Acts of those Symposia are published by E. Castelli: *Mythe et Foi*, Paris, 1966; *L'Analyse du Langage Theologique*, Paris 1969; *L'Infaillibilit  , Son Aspect Philosophique et Theologique*, Paris, 1970.

²¹ P. Ricoeur, X. Leon-Dufour, etc., *Exegese et Hermeneutique*, Paris, 1971. See also P. Ricoeur, *Le Conflit des Interpretations*, Paris, 1969.

²² X. Leon-Dufour, *Resurrection de Jesus et Message Pascal*, Paris, 1971.

that of the inspiration of the non-Christian Scriptures, a corollary to the new thinking on the situation of the world religions in the scheme of salvation. Though it has not yet been the object of any full-sized publication, it is a recurring motif of any seminar, conference or symposium. For the liturgy also, it is suggested that the Liturgy of the Word should be prefaced by extracts from the Hindu Scriptures so that the cosmic covenant may be commemorated along with the historical covenants, or that the unknown Christ of Hinduism may be evoked along with the unknown Christ of the Old Testament. Is this gnosticism, or will it be the positive contribution of an Indian Christian theology? For want of a well-balanced and frank exposition of the principles involved, the question remains beset with the vagueness and the irritating repetitiveness of oral discussions or of short essays. It is to be hoped that, through the asceticism of writing, the discussion may go beyond mere emotionalism to attain the firmness of solid theological enquiry.

In this connection, it might be remarked that the momentum of theological thinking in India when it moves on its own, seems to follow a direction opposite to that of the West. In the West, maybe unconsciously but quite effectively, the theology of Inspiration has followed what could be described as a secularistic trend: man has come into his own in inspiration as in the other fields, through the better awareness of the anthropological dimension of inspiration. In the opposite direction Indian theological thinking on the same problem seems to tend to integrate what was formerly considered as profane into what we hold to be sacred; from a Christian point of view, Hindu writings would not only witness to the greatness of Indian secular culture, but would also have a sacred value in terms of the salvation history we believe in. There may be more than meets the eye in this debate on the inspiration of the non-Christian Scriptures.