

Tradition, Community and Hermeneutics

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One of the methods adopted by the early Church in defending and promoting itself was to adduce scriptural authority. This was done as much to establish its credibility as a community as to vindicate the legitimacy of its traditions. Beginning as it did practically *de novo* with the proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the Church had to work out an approach in its self-defence, which in fact it did. All those who accepted the proclamation regarding Jesus joined the Apostolic community, which developed its traditions within the cultural setting of their time and life. Thus from the beginning of the Church, the community, its traditions and Scripture went together, forming a totality.

In itself the community is the concrete expression of the life in harmony of individual persons committed to a faith and ideal. It has the inward aspect of healthy relationship that binds the individuals together subjectively, and the external aspects of conformity to certain patterns of behaviour followed objectively. Traditions belong to the latter and are intended to promote the former. Viewed in this way, it is possible to say that traditions are developed by the community in order to conserve its two-fold character. The community claims to receive its authority from Scripture. "Inspired by God and profitable for teaching," Scripture belongs to the community, which interprets it for the promotion of its preaching and teaching work. The community, then, and its traditions are prior to Scripture. Though Scripture does not change, the hermeneutic work built on it is likely to undergo development bringing out deeper understanding of its meaning and application.

In this paper a very tentative attempt is made to discuss briefly how this development has taken place in the Church and what responsibility the Indian Church can legitimately undertake to continue the process with reference to itself.

I The Apostolic Community and its Hermeneutics

The Apostolic community had our Old Testament as its Scripture. Conformity with it in areas where the Church saw common ground between the old and the new, and the idea of fulfilment in areas where the new made significant departure from the old, were the two ways

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in which the early Church made use of the Old Testament Scripture. To accomplish both these tasks the early Church had recourse to hermeneutics. The areas of common ground between the old and the new need not detain us. As regards the new positions, the point made was that they were not novel, for they had already been foretold or partially revealed, so that a fulfilment or completion of the same was necessary, and this could be found in the Christian dispensation.

The Old Testament had been produced by the Hebrew people within and for their community, containing the traditions concerning their history, religion and life. The observance of the Sabbath, circumcision, and the many aspects of worship and life in general—all these were based on traditions prevalent in the community. These are noted in Scripture for the guidance of the people. As time passed and the original cultural and social setting in which these had come into vogue underwent change, the Jews themselves undertook hermeneutic work to expound them.

The New Testament is of a different character. Assuming the validity of the Old Testament as Scripture, it seeks on the one hand to offer justification for the emergence of the Church, and on the other, to give guidance in life and faith to those who became members in the Christian community. In fulfilling this task, the New Testament interprets the Old Testament in a significant way with reference to a number of issues.

The new community which produced the New Testament claimed continuity with, and fulfilment of, the old community. The reference in the *Didache* to the weekly fast of the Christian community is a case in point in this respect. "Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites," it says referring to the Jews; "for they fast on the second and fifth days of the week; but do ye fast on Wednesdays and on the Preparation" (i.e., preparation for the Sabbath which is Friday). The early Christian community took over from the tradition adopted by devout Jews of our Lord's time the custom of fasting on two days a week, namely on Mondays and Thursdays. But the days were changed to Wednesdays and Fridays, both in commemoration of our Lord's passion and crucifixion. For the Christian community, then, Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, were the fundamental point of departure from the old.

There was another factor also that played an important role in the formation of the Christian Church. Though it began in a Jewish milieu, it gradually moved away from its original cradle and adopted the Graeco-Roman social and cultural setting as its context. This resulted in its adoption of traditions implying further departure from the religious and spiritual heritage of the Hebrew people. The movement in this direction had already started among the Jews even before the advent of Christianity. The Jews of the diaspora, particularly the Alexandrine Jews, had begun the work of confronting the Greek intellectual and cultural setting of those times in commending their religious life. They had produced the LXX translation of the Old Testament, which the early Church acknowledged as its Scripture.

It is a fact, however, that the Church which moved into the Graeco-Roman world was careful not to take over any new Scripture, but it adapted its hermeneutics to justify the adjustments which it made with the new environments. Thus, the Orthodox-Catholic Christian Church took its shape by adopting two departures from the religious heritage of the Old Testament. The central point in them was indeed the proclamation concerning Jesus Christ—"a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles." To commend him to both the Jew and the Gentile was the one pre-eminent concern of the Church.

The first of these departures consisted in the transition from the old into the new. The second was not strictly speaking a transition, but a movement into the Mediterranean world with the Gospel. As regards the first of the two departures, a number of points were made by the Christian community to relate its message to the Old Testament.

His Coming was foretold: The New Testament community assumed that the Jews had anticipated the coming of the Messiah, and that this expectation was fulfilled in Jesus. All the three Synoptic Gospels note in this respect Malachi 3:1: "Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold he is coming, says the Lord of hosts." The Synoptic Gospels take the words, "Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me" as a prophecy concerning John the baptist. He was to be sent as a messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah. This Messiah whose coming is prophesied has appeared in Jesus of Nazareth. The question whether Malachi was in fact offering such a prophecy, or whether he was so understood in the Jewish community was not raised. The assumption may well have been that if they had not so understood it, they were not seeing the truth. What was unclear in the words was supplied by hermeneutics.

His Birth from the Virgin Mother was foretold: The Messiah came. A number of signs indicated his advent. One such sign was his supernatural birth. This the community claimed to have been foretold by the prophet Isaiah. The Gospel of Matthew, written with the Jews specially in mind, is careful to note this fact. Taking over Isa. 7:14 from the LXX translation where the Hebrew *halmah* is rendered as *parthenos*, the Gospel proclaims the tradition of the early Church that the Messiah Jesus was born of a human mother who had no male cooperation for her conception. Isa. 7:14 is taken here as a prophecy concerning the birth of the Messiah. We see that the Christian community adopted its hermeneutics in defence of a tradition which it had concerning the supernatural birth of its Lord.

His Death as a redemptive event had been foretold: Can God's Messiah die? The answer has to be "No." But Jesus was crucified as a criminal of those ancient times. This fact, however, did not dissuade the apostolic community from believing in him or from proclaiming him to the world. For it had adopted the tradition that his death was redemptive. The community was convinced not only that he was innocent, but also that he died testifying to the truth.

The early Church tried to relate the death of Jesus to the Old Testament in two ways. Firstly, it looked upon his death as in itself a sacrifice, whereby the Jewish animal sacrifices in the temple had been done away with. Secondly, as a sacrifice it was a vicarious act intended to bring about the salvation of the whole world. The limited saving function of the Jewish sacrifice is now replaced by the cosmic salvation effected by the sacrifice on Calvary.

In addition to the Old Testament sacrificial system as a shadowy precursor of the death of Jesus on Calvary, the early Church saw in it a fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53. That the Suffering Servant of Yahweh was the model which Jesus had adopted for himself in his humiliation and death is a tradition acknowledged in early Christian tradition. In agreement with it Isaiah 53 was expounded as a prophecy concerning Jesus. It is to this tradition that Philip the evangelist referred in his meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch, as recorded in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The eunuch was reading Isaiah 53 without grasping the meaning of the passage. Now Philip explained it by saying that it was a prophecy concerning Jesus in his suffering and death. The explanation made sense to the Ethiopian eunuch and he accepted it. The question whether by the concept of the "Suffering Servant of Yahweh" Deutero-Isaiah had prophesied the suffering and death of Jesus was answered in the affirmative by the Christian community from the beginning by exercising the hermeneutic task in relation to itself and its tradition.

His Resurrection foretold: The tradition of the early Christian community was based on the proclamation that the sacrificial and vicarious death of Jesus had its triumph in his resurrection. This in fact was the foundation on which the early Church affirmed its faith and the Christian preachers proclaimed the Gospel. St Paul, who acknowledged this foundation of the Christian community in the light of his own conversion experience, testifies that "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain."

This proclamation, however, needed scriptural evidence to commend itself to the Jews. In his speech noted in Acts 2, Peter quotes Psalm 16:8-11 in support of this Christian tradition. It may be relevant to refer here to the Syriac Peshitta version of Psalm 88:10, which reads:

Behold you do wonders for the dead;
And warriors rise up and praise you.

The Hebrew reads:

Dost thou work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise up to praise thee?

The verse corresponding to the Peshitta here may not have been known to the Apostle Peter or to his reporter. In any case, the fact is that the Christian tradition saw in Psalm 16 a prophetic statement regarding the resurrection of the Messiah. Whether the Psalm did really say this is not an issue. The hermeneutic work which the Christian community adopted has this emphasis.

The illustrations noted above with reference to Jesus should be enough to show that the Christian community of apostolic times did not take hermeneutics as an independent enquiry. On crucial points in the apostolic preaching, the community could find bases in the Old Testament to defend its traditions in a way that would make sense to the believers.

II The Church in the Graeco-Roman World and its Hermeneutics

This subject is not possible to be discussed here adequately at all. It being so vast, we shall merely touch on the question of Christ's person and two other important issues to see how the hermeneutic work came to be carried on by the Church of the Graeco-Roman world.

The Person of Jesus Christ: As we have noted already, it is the proclamation concerning Jesus of Nazareth that led people of the various races of the Mediterranean world into the Church. Every community thus formed claimed to hold the faith which had been "once for all delivered to the saints," for which the Letter of Jude appeals to its readers to contend. Any development on it was considered nothing; but the spelling out of the same, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in relation to questions raised in every generation. The apostle Paul sees it as the Gospel and insists that "even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed." Thus it was believed that everything contained in the Church was a legitimate development on the original deposit of the faith, or the Gospel that had been preached from the beginning. All these emphases were substantiated by the hermeneutic work of the community.

The Messianic concept which commended the Gospel to a Jewish audience was not sufficient to lead those outside the Jewish orbit to accept the faith. To them it was the concept of the *Logos* of Greek thought that appealed more. Though *Logos* had a special nuance of meaning for Greek thinkers, the Old Testament also had the term *word*, and the Hellenistic Jews had brought them together. Theological development in the Church of the Graeco-Roman world, following the New Testament itself, assumed Jesus as a proper name, and took *Logos* as a crucial term for expounding his person. In this way, the idea that Jesus Christ was God the Word incarnate could gain currency in Christian thinking.

Difference in Traditions: Communities everywhere were not in complete agreement in the matter of hermeneutics. The different hermeneutical approaches which the two ancient catechetical schools of Alexandria and Antioch had been adopting are well known. This difference between them led each of them to evolve its own tradition in interpreting the person of Christ, and this caused the division of the Church in the East on account of the fifth century councils. Behind that division which continues to this day, the relation of hermeneutics

to the community and its traditions is very clearly discernible in diverse ways.

The difference in hermeneutics on this issue between the two schools during the fifth century may be noted by referring to the crucial text used by the Alexandrines in support of their tradition. It was John 1:14 "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Alexandrine theologians took the verse to mean the *sarkosis* or *meth-basronutho* of the Word, or God the Son, and affirmed the incarnation as a definitive event in which God the Son did in reality take upon himself an economy and led a human life in the world of time and space. He came down, or lowered himself in love, and raised manhood to himself. Thus, Jesus Christ is the Lord in whom the salvation of the world has been accomplished once and for all. The Antiochenes had another tradition. Insisting on the ultimate transcendence of God and the disparateness of God and man, they found it impossible to affirm God's lowering of himself and discarded *sarkosis* on the part of God as a fable. But they acknowledged the definitiveness of the Christ-event and the once-for-allness of the salvation. The exegesis they put on John 1:14 was that the "became flesh" should be understood in the light of the "dwelt among us." Thus the text meant for them that God the Word dwelt in Jesus, the *homo assumptus*, from the very first moment of his conception in the womb of the Virgin. In this way, adopting a hermeneutical tradition different from that of the Alexandrines, the Antiochenes maintain that Jesus of Nazareth was a man, always and unceasingly, indwelt by God the Word. This indwelling was for them indeed unique, and not like the indwelling of God in a prophet or a saint. Moreover, it did not affect either the human reality or the growth and development of Jesus in any way. We can see here that each of these schools of theology defended the tradition built up by its community on the strength of its own hermeneutics.

This is not to say that these traditions accepted each other. On the contrary, each of them tried its best to declare itself exclusively the only valid interpretation of the faith. The position adopted by Severus of Antioch (d. 538 A.D.) will clarify the issue for us. A consistent critic of the Antiochene theology noted above and of the Council of Chalcedon, he developed the Alexandrine point of view, meeting criticisms brought against it. In the face of questions seeking justification for his doctrinal interpretation, Severus said that his teaching was exclusively the faith of the Church. To show this was so, he argued that this was how the fathers had understood the Scriptures within the tradition of the Church. The Scriptures belong to the Church, which explains them. Hermeneutics should be carried on in the service of the Church.

This point is made in the West as well as in the East. The Vincentian Canon, to refer to one instance, insists on this very point. Faced with the one-sided emphasis of Augustine in his teaching on grace and predestination, Vincent of Lerins offers his view. He refers to the query: "The Canon of the Scriptures being complete and abundantly clear, why should there be an interpretation of the Church?"

His answer is that the Scriptures are taken in different ways by different persons, obviously implying that Augustine's use of the Scriptures in support of his view could not be admitted, so that "we take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all." The hermeneutic work should be carried on only in the light of the community's universally maintained tradition.

Papacy and Hermeneutics: More important than the Vincentian Canon is the development of the Papacy in the history of the Western Church. The theory of a Petrine Office as being perpetuated in the Church through the See of Rome goes back clearly to the late fourth century. Pope Innocent I (402-417) wrote to the Synod of African Bishops in connection with the Pelagian controversy a letter in 417, condemning Pelagius. In it he asserts the papal theory in unmistakable terms:

With due care and propriety you consult the secrets of the Apostolic office, that office I mean, to which belongs, besides the things that are without, the care of all the Churches. . . . Especially as often as a question of faith is discussed, I think that all our brothers and fellow-bishops should refer to none other than to Peter, the author of their name and office.

At the councils of Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451 the Roman legates in each of them made statements expressing almost the same view.

The Church in the West worked out the papal theory and established a tradition. In support of this theory it was argued that our Lord himself had appointed Peter with the authority to govern the Church, and that his office continued intact in the See of Rome. Scriptural texts, particularly Matthew 16:13-20, were adduced in promoting the view. However, the interpretation built on these texts by those who accept the theory is at variance with the meaning seen in them by those who do not accept it. The point of view in this regard adopted by the Church in the East in general is noted in the 28th Canon of the Council of Chalcedon, acknowledging Rome as the first major See in Christendom: this canon ascribed its primacy to its political importance as the capital of the Roman Empire.

Such differences in biblical exegesis among communities can be multiplied. What we can infer from them is that the Scripture is not taken by any community in isolation from itself, or its traditions.

Celibacy and Hermeneutics: The relation of hermeneutics to community and its traditions can be still more clearly brought out by noting the exegesis built on passages which do not support celibacy. The monastic movement through which it asserted itself was of eastern origin, and it is in the East that it had its uninhibited expression. The West took it over from the East and brought it under the service of the Church in different ways. Though the Protestant movement as a whole abandoned it, the rest of the Christian world in both the East and the West developed an attitude of extolling the celibate life over the

married state. This is done by way of hermeneutics. The Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ, the unmarried life which he lived, and some remarks of the Apostle Paul in his Corinthian letters are believed to imply the superiority of celibacy over marriage.

This development has a history. The Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ and the celibate life which he led have clear New Testament support. But it shows also that our Lord who was unmarried chose married men as his apostles, chief of whom was Peter, a married man. The obvious picture we have here is that marriage and celibacy are equally respectable vocations. This balance came to be modified with the emergence of the monastic movement, which introduced the idea that marriage was an inferior state. The way this emphasis is made in the Antiochene Syrian Church, as it is noted in the writings of Gregory Bar Hebraeus of the thirteenth century, may be noted. Man, he says, is a being composed of body and soul. The body leads him down to the earth and material things. The desire of the soul is for higher things, in whose pursuit lies man's real freedom. Though lawful marriage is good and permissible, particularly for the propagation of the race, it does not have the same spiritual status as celibacy. Marriage distracts man from the noble pursuit of the divine life.

In agreement with this emphasis the Church in the East, the Antiochene Syrian Church in particular adopted its hermeneutics of a number of New Testament passages. Thus, I Cor. 9:5 is interpreted as implying that Peter and the other Apostles had their wives with them only as sisters; I Tim. 3:2 and Titus 1:6 as signifying that clergymen who happen to lose wives by death should not marry again; and I Cor. 7:5 as enjoining that husbands and wives should stay away from each other during the season of Lent and on days of fasting.

Another important hermeneutical work to be considered in this context is that built on Matthew 1:25, "he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son." The words, "knew her not," interpreted in the Antiochene Syrian tradition, as it can be noted in the writings of Moses bar Kephais, a ninth to tenth century exegete, deserves notice. These words, he insists in his homily on Christmas, do not imply the idea that Joseph and Mary had physical union between them after the birth of Jesus. On the contrary, just as he had no conjugal relation with her before the childbirth, he did not have it thereafter either. "He knew her not" refers to his lack of knowledge as to the fact that she was *Theotokos*. This he knew from the signs and wonders that happened subsequent to the childbirth. The exegesis can be neatly presented, and the tradition that Mary was ever-Virgin can be maintained to the satisfaction of the community.

The community assumed its character within the cultural and intellectual setting of its existence, and with it suitable traditions. All the time the community was keen to relate the traditions so evolved to the Scriptures by means of hermeneutics which sounded plausible.

III The Indian Church and Hermeneutics

We have seen from the foregoing survey that the hermeneutic tradition of the Church in the Graeco-Roman world has passed through three stages. In the first stage, beginning with the Old Testament as its Scripture, it proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. Secondly, it confronted the Mediterranean world by adopting the *Logos* concept of Greek thought and commended Jesus Christ to the non-Jewish people. Thirdly, we have noted two developments—papacy in the West and an attitude of extolling celibacy over marriage in both the East and the West. The first two stages led the Church to acquire its character as a world religion. But the third is different. Neither the papal theory nor the extolling of celibacy over the married state can claim universal acceptance either in Christian thinking or in Church traditions. The Christian communities in India are themselves divided about their merits and legitimacy.

One point should be clear from what has been noted in this paper. The Christian communities in India have every right and responsibility to evolve hermeneutic traditions that are more convincing to the Indian mind. In doing this, at least two positions should be considered basic. Firstly, the Indian Church, like the Church of the Graeco-Roman world, does not take over any Scripture over and above the Old and the New Testaments. Secondly, Christianity has already acquired its character on the foundation of the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the one and only Saviour of the world. This affirmation has other spiritual implications. The Indian Church is not going to change them. Its responsibility on the other hand is to commend this faith of the Church to the Indian people, as did the Church of the Mediterranean world to the people there.