

## BIBLE AND TRADITION

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MANY who are interested in the growth of an irenic theology which aims at solving some of the contradictions and oppositions of divided Christendom will welcome a sermon under the above title, printed in the December number of *Theology*.<sup>1</sup> Implicit in its argument is an intimation that the historic-critical method, though an indispensable instrument in the hands of the theologian to assist him in establishing the true sense of Scripture, has proved itself insufficient as the final and decisive criterion in biblical interpretation. Something further is required and that something would seem to be a deeper understanding of the meaning and function of Tradition.

Very briefly summarized, the argument of the sermon is that the Reformation produced a stalemate between Catholicism and Protestantism, both sides becoming involved in a closed-system theology. Up to the sixteenth century Catholicism had developed harmoniously, but in such a fashion as to interpret the New Testament in ways other than the New Testament itself really allowed. The Reformation broke this development by recourse to the Bible only. But Protestantism, almost at once, began the busy construction of closed doctrinal systems, unconsciously imitating Catholicism in positing a single canon of biblical interpretation; Lutheran justification by faith alone or Calvinist predestination of the elect. From the embattled state produced by these closed systems of theology, in which Catholicism and Protestantism had alike become involved, arose the historical method. In the hope of breaking the deadlock between them this method asked the question: 'What does the Bible mean when considered in its own right, and without reference to any doctrinal system?'

It was the confident hope that it could answer this question and provide a Christianity solidly, because scientifically, based that gave zest to historical criticism and led to the constant

<sup>1</sup>*Bible and Tradition*. A sermon preached before the University of Oxford on 24 February 1957 by the Rev. C. F. Evans, Fellow and Chaplain of Corpus Christi College. *Theology*, December 1957.

sharpening of its tools. This hope has not been fulfilled and is not likely to be. There is, it would seem, not one theology of the Bible, but several theologies in it. Even 'biblical theology', he holds, will turn out to be determined by some canon of interpretation which is not itself the immediate and automatic product of criticism.

The historical method, however, may have been producing something not looked for at the outset, yet of greater value in the history of Christendom. It may have opened up the Bible to show that it does not contain a system of theology and is a singularly unpromising foundation for theology considered as a closed system; and this in two ways. It has recovered from the periphery of Christian thinking and placed at its centre the eschatology of the New Testament. The expectation of an end, the looking forward to a consummation, cannot now be regarded only as one department of Christian doctrine, it is the presupposition of all that is said and done in the New Testament.

The result of this is that the Bible has become a book open at both ends; its full meaning is not as it were enclosed, it looks back to the life of which it records the origins and forward into the fullness of that which lies beyond it, the finality of God. This new conception by-passes the embattled systems of both Catholicism and Protestantism, in so far as either of them encroaches upon the finality of God by claiming for itself an illegitimate finality, that of an infallible book or an infallible church. Both sides in the Catholic-Protestant controversy have been contending for what is of great importance; the authority of the Book as the unique record and witness of the once for all event, in which God is supremely revealed, and the authority of Tradition, the ongoing life of the Church in which the continuing and living Lord explicates his revelation and brings it continually to life. Yet both have thought of themselves as operating with fixed and rigid entities. On the one hand the Bible, firmly sealed at both ends, a book of uniform divinity throughout, the end implicit or even explicit in the beginning. On the other hand Tradition, an ascertainable number of teachings and practices marching parallel with Scripture and supplying its lacunae. This deadlock between Catholicism and Protestantism can only be solved by a new conception of the relations of Scripture and Tradition. No longer the Bible and Tradition alongside each

other, or even against each other, but Tradition within the Bible, the Bible itself largely Tradition.

The foregoing paragraphs are, of course, only a summary of Mr Evans's discussion of the problem set by the failure of the historical method to reach final decisions in biblical theology, and the need he sees for a new and deeper conception of Tradition if the deadlock between Catholicism and Protestantism is to be broken. It has been made as far as possible in his own words; without, we hope, distortion or misrepresentation. The relations between Scripture, Tradition and the Deposit of Faith in Catholic theology are still the subject matter of debate between the theologians. It is not the purpose of the present article to enter this debate in any general way, or to apply its discussions to the many interesting points which Mr Evans's sermon raises. Its object is the much more modest one of contributing a single item of eirenic elucidation to one question dealt with in it, by showing that in his interpretation of the decree of the Council of Trent concerning Scripture and Tradition,<sup>2</sup> by leaning too exclusively in one particular direction, he makes it seem as if his view were the essential Catholic position, which is in fact considerably less embattled than his readers would gather from this interpretation. He takes the wording of the decree to mean that unwritten Tradition is a separate source of explicit doctrine, not contained in Scripture, handed down orally from Christ to his Apostles and thence to the Church at large. This interpretation is a post-Reformation development, in one particular direction, of the teaching of the Fathers and the great scholastics. The earlier age was not so preoccupied with the pressure of history as the later one became, and it treated this question with a lack of precision which subsequently proved impossible to maintain. Development

<sup>2</sup> Session IV, 8 April 1546. Latin text in Denzinger, 783. 'The Sacred and Ecumenical Synod . . . keeping this always in view that the purity of the Gospel be preserved in the Church, the Gospel which, promised before through the prophets in the holy scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ first promulgated with his own mouth, and then commanded to be preached by his Apostles to every creature, as the fountain of all saving truth and moral discipline; and seeing clearly that this truth and discipline are contained in the written books and the unwritten traditions, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves, by direction of the Holy Spirit, which have come down to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand. The synod receives and venerates all these with an equal affection of piety and reverence, the books both of the Old and New Testaments, and also the said traditions, those pertaining to faith as well as to morals, having been dictated either by Christ's own word of mouth or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.'

in some form was forced upon the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians by the necessity of defending in face of Protestantism doctrines of faith not explicit in the Scriptures, such as the cultus of our Lady and the Saints.

The position they took up in support of these doctrines was based upon an appeal to apostolic traditions independent of Scripture. With the progress of historical science this position became increasingly difficult to hold. As Mr Evans points out, it involved the implication that these doctrines were secretly handed down, over long periods, before emerging into the light of history. In the first ages of the Church, however, this esoteric claim was certainly a mark of Gnosticism, vigorously repudiated by those of orthodox faith. He further observes that in the more recent dogmas defined by the Church of Rome the attempt to find a basis for them in unwritten traditions, handed down in unbroken succession from the Apostles, is frankly abandoned, and the place of traditions (in this sense) is taken by Tradition, understood now as that which is believed by the present consensus of the faithful.

But this description of Tradition, prompted no doubt by the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, is not one which could be accepted as it stands by any Catholic theologian. Only in a secondary and accessory sense is Tradition that which is believed by the present consensus of the faithful. Its primary sense is the authoritative handing on and interpretation of the deposit of faith. Within the deposit some truths are held to have been implicit at first and as such to have been handed down in tradition. In course of time they became explicit in the Spirit-guided mind of the Church and were formulated and defined as truths of revelation by its supreme magisterium.

The growing realization that some truths were for long implicit in the deposit of faith has brought into prominence in modern theology the principle of doctrinal development. This principle was foreshadowed by St Vincent of Lerins in the fifth century,<sup>3</sup> and was known to St Thomas and his contemporaries in the

<sup>3</sup> 'Consequently the understanding, knowledge and wisdom of each and all—of each churchman and the whole Church—ought to grow and progress greatly and eagerly through the course of ages and centuries, provided that the advance be on its own lines, in the same sphere of doctrine, the same feeling, the same sentiment.' (P.L. 50, 667.) *Commonitorium*, A.D. 434 (quoted in *Documents Illustrating Papal Authority*, E. Giles, S.P.C.K., 1952, page 273).

thirteenth, though applied by them in contexts other than those which modern critical history has supplied.<sup>4</sup> Cardinal Newman was the first historian of dogma to draw out the major implications of doctrinal development in a full-scale treatise, and his famous work, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, completed in October 1845, remains the classical exposition of the subject in the English language.

The present position, viewed in the light of modern critical studies, is that in the first age of the Church there was a single source of doctrine, the oral tradition, which embodied nevertheless the written Word of the Old Testament. This tradition had its origin in Christ's teaching to his Apostles, handed on by them to the infant Church. It was recognized as the deposit of faith, increased perhaps by further revelations made to Apostles (as to St Peter at Joppa and St John on Patmos). Very gradually this deposit, in the form of the dynamic of apostolic preaching, was reduced to writing in epistles and gospels, till by the time the canon was relatively fixed the whole, or at least the greater part, of revelation had come to be embodied, either explicitly or implicitly, in the written Word; in Mr Evans's pithy phrase: 'Tradition within the Bible, the Bible itself largely Tradition'.

There remained no doubt, apart from this written Word, certain remembered sayings and teachings of Christ, certain interpretations, given by him or his Apostles, of divine events, such as the institution of Baptism and the Eucharist, certain developments of teaching and practice sanctioned by the Apostles as according to the Master's mind. These passed into the mind of the Church and were handed on without being incorporated into the canonical Scriptures. It can be argued whether among these unwritten traditions were included any doctrines not also contained, implicitly at least, in the written Word. The only independent traditions seem to have been interpretations and applications of existing doctrines and the liturgical practices arising from them.<sup>5</sup>

For from the day of Pentecost the common mind of the Church,

4 *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 1, 7. All the articles of faith are contained implicitly in certain primary propositions (*primis credibilibus*): namely, that there is a God, and that he cares about man's salvation . . . and there has not been an increase in the substance of the articles of faith with the passage of time, for whatever subsequent believers held was contained in the faith of their fathers who preceded them, though implicitly.

5 That the Council of Trent itself regarded this view as tenable is evidenced by its own action. The original draft of the decree concerning the acceptance of the sacred books

the Believing Community, pondered on the divine teaching and began to draw out and make explicit what was lying implicit in the deposit. The process can be seen at work in many parts of the New Testament; as, for instance, when at the Council of Jerusalem<sup>6</sup> it was decided under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that circumcision was not necessary to salvation. Under the same inspiration also, we do not know the circumstances, the decision was made that baptism could rightly be given to infants.<sup>7</sup> The process has gone forward continuously in the life of the Church till today, and it appears from the Acts that the authoritative decisions which implemented its findings were regarded as infallible then, as they have been ever since. This view of Tradition has always been, in its essentials, the view of classical Catholic theology, and it is, at the very least, wholly compatible with the terms of the Tridentine decree.<sup>8</sup>

In view of this it is clear that Mr Evans's conception of Tradition as he believes the Catholic Church to hold and teach it is derived from a one-sided and unsatisfactory interpretation of the Tridentine decree. Later on in his sermon he quotes from Père Louis Bouyer a view of Tradition which he approves as offering

and apostolic traditions, proposed for examination at a Congregation held on 22 March 1546, read: 'And seeing clearly that this truth (and discipline) are contained *partly* in the written books and *partly* in unwritten traditions which, received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself. . . ' In the decree as it was actually accepted, in Session IV on 8 April of the same year, the words in brackets were added and those in italics expunged. The original draft would have made Mr Evans's interpretation the only possible one. In its finally accepted form the decree made both views equally tenable. Vide *Concilium Tridentinum*, Tom. V, pages 31 and 91. Societas Gorresiana, B. Herder, Freiburg, 1911.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 15, 6-12 and 28.

<sup>7</sup> It is sometimes said by Anglican and other writers that no doctrine can be a part of revelation which is founded upon events not recorded in the New Testament; e.g. 'We shall do well to be suspicious of any Christian attempt to found doctrine upon events of which there is no record in the New Testament on the ground that they have been transmitted by oral tradition, or even that it is congruent with the rest of the faith that they should have taken place'. (*Revelation in Christ* by William Nicholls, S.C.M. Press, 1957, page 122.) This remark evidently has the perpetual Virginity, Immaculate Conception and Assumption of our Lady in mind. Yet infant baptism is just such a doctrine, founded upon events of which there is no record in the New Testament. It is nearly universal among Christians and its validity is considered by many to be a matter of primary importance to salvation. But it can only be justified as a true means of grace, as Oscar Cullman justifies it against Karl Barth, (*Baptism in the New Testament*, S.C.M. Press, 1950) because it is congruent with the whole context of the Sacrament within the Christian faith, and has been handed down from the time of its first institution by oral tradition.

<sup>8</sup> In its essentials. It is of course true that the development of scientific historical studies has shown that some doctrines, formerly believed to have been explicit in the deposit of faith from the beginning, are now known to have been implicit only, having emerged at a later date than was formerly supposed.

in its own way, in considerable measure, an escape from the position in which he holds Catholicism to have become involved. Père Bouyer points out that the Fathers constantly speak at one moment of the Faith as wholly contained in the Scriptures and at another of Scripture as unavailing without Tradition to complement or supplement it. They think of the Faith not as a number of propositions but as a unity, a single living object under multiple forms. Nor do they consider it primarily as an authority *under* which, but as a whole world *in* which we live. This wholeness is proliferated in the living Gospel of the Church. Though always consonant with Scripture, the Gospel of the Church is not dependent upon it; its purpose is to prevent us from maiming the data of Scripture through minimizing or distorting interpretation. Thus the Faith objectively speaking is a deposit once for all committed, in its fullness, to the Church, and that fullness is for ever attainable in Scripture; this same object is not to be grasped anywhere else than in the Church itself, through which it is transmitted to the individual as a life to be lived in conformity with the life of the Church which is the life of Christ's Mystical Body.<sup>9</sup> In view of his reading of the Tridentine decree it is hardly surprising that Mr Evans looks upon Père Bouyer's view as somewhat out of step with official Catholic teaching and seems doubtful of its ability to hold its place. It is however, in fact, St Thomas's own teaching as set out in the introductory Question of the *Summa Theologica*, and in Book IV of the *Contra Gentes*.<sup>10</sup>

It is when Mr Evans describes the deeper conception of Tradition, which he himself thinks will come near to solving the Catholic-Protestant deadlock, that we realize how much his reading of the Tridentine decree has misled him, and now near he comes to Père Bouyer, and therefore to St Thomas. He holds that historical criticism 'has made us aware of the continuing life of the Church in the first century as the very matrix out of which it has pleased God to give us his Word. . . . The more the New Testament is taken to bits the more it leads us back to a teaching, preaching, worshipping and living church as the background of

<sup>9</sup> *The Eastern Churches Quarterly*, Vol. VII, Supplementary Issue.

<sup>10</sup> Père Bouyer himself establishes this in Chapter VI, 'The Sovereign Authority of Scripture', in his book, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, Harvill Press, 1956, page 130.

all its parts and as the setting in which alone they come alive. We are brought into touch with the transcript of a tradition which is constantly in movement.' (page 493.)

It is true, no doubt, that modern New Testament studies, employing the methods of historical criticism, have done much to make this historically more apparent than it formerly was. Catholics, however, would say that the contemporary and existing society to which they belong, and which they believe to be the Mystical Body of Christ on earth, has always made them aware by its teaching of the close interrelation of the Word proclaimed with the Word received in the Church's understanding of the Gospel, and that its continuing life, not only in the first century but in every age, is the very matrix out of which it has pleased God to give us that Word.

We are inclined to guess that what Mr Evans says of the embattled position of Catholicism owing to its involvement in a closed-system theology stems from his misconceptions concerning Tradition as described by the Council of Trent, and that he is here chasing what a *Theology* reviewer has recently spoken of as the tired old fox dubbed 'propositional theology'.<sup>11</sup> It is a pity this reviewer did not write 'propositional revelation', which is no doubt what he means. The confusion between revelation and theology is at the root of the 'propositional' controversy. For revelation is not theology and it is not propositional, though a proposition may be revealed. Theology, on the other hand, *is* of its very nature propositional. This is clear from the following passage in the *Summa Theologica* which has a high relevance to the whole of this discussion:<sup>12</sup>

'The truth of the Faith is contained in Scripture in scattered manner and in widely differing ways, and in some of these ways obscurely. To draw out the truth of faith from the Scriptures requires long study and labour which cannot be undertaken by those for whom knowledge of the truth is necessary, because they are too busy or incapable of such study. And so it was necessary that from the sense of Scripture clear summaries (creeds and definitions) should be compiled, which

<sup>11</sup> *Theology*, November 1957, page 475.

<sup>12</sup> St Thomas of course represents the classical tradition of scholastic theology; his works, it is said, lay on the altar at the Council of Trent alongside the Bible. We shall not be treading on dangerous ground in taking him as a guide in ecumenical elucidation.



set before all the things to be believed; these are not something added to Scripture, but rather are drawn from it.<sup>13</sup>

St Thomas is saying here that the articles of faith (summaries) are *not* God's Word revealing, his self-disclosure in Christ. They are man's word responding in faith by human formulation to what God has revealed. They safeguard the truth from distortion and error but do not and cannot exhaust its depths. They are uttered as it were in the person of the whole Church, which is united by its faith expressed and handed down in the creed. This faith is informed by charity and is found in all those who are visibly and by merit members of the Church (*ibidem*, ad 3). This utterance, the preparatory work for which is done by the theologians, has its beginnings in the insights of the faithful, the fruit of contemplation in private prayer and liturgical worship, where all, learned and simple alike, have their due share. The work of the theologian as such is one of scientific research, philosophical thought and critical appreciation, all brought to bear upon the subject matter of divine revelation and pursued under the guidance of the rule of Faith. The purpose of these disciplines is that the depth and extent of its content may be made more readily accessible to the faithful, and by grace may be penetrated by them.

Thus prayer and theology, in their different fashions, subserve but cannot of themselves guarantee that relative finality which makes an utterance of the Church, as an embodiment of its faith, immune from error. This guarantee belongs solely by a grace of state to the teaching *magisterium* vested in the successors of the Apostles, in which the final and decisive verdict is that given by the successor of St Peter. In the next article (II-II, 1, 10), St Thomas says that 'it is the office of the Supreme Pontiff to sanction by his authority new creeds when needed, because it is his office to determine with finality what is to be believed, in such a way that it may be held with unshaken faith by all'.

In other words, God's revelation is in itself far from being an orderly system; it is scattered throughout the biblical record, it is given in widely differing ways, some of which can be extremely obscure.<sup>14</sup> Nor can it be confined within the bounds of any system,

<sup>13</sup> *Summa*, II-II, 1, 9, ad 1.

<sup>14</sup> Dr Josef Pieper speaks with authority on the philosophy and theology of St Thomas. The following quotation is relevant: 'Medieval scholastics in general and St Thomas in particular tend to be represented as though they were the first thinkers to achieve

for in itself and in its total content it is above and beyond rational formulation.<sup>15</sup> Yet in concession to the feebleness of human comprehension it must and should be made compendious by means of scientific rational theology.<sup>16</sup> St Thomas spent his life in this work, but never for a moment with the idea that it could be a substitute for, let alone an improvement upon, God's Word to men embodied in the Scriptures. This can only be truly known here by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and then only through a glass in a dark manner. The attainment of such knowledge is a process personal to the soul of each believer and it will reach finality only in the Beatific Vision.

And so finally: 'In the early morning of December 6, 1273, at Naples, something mysterious happened to Thomas Aquinas; something which inhibited and paralysed further composition. It was no news to him that, as compared with revelation itself, his *Summa* was like straw; the *Summa* itself had implied as much in its opening pages. But even straw had been useful, if only to show which way the prophetic spirit blows. Now even that was a thing of the past. Revelation had come to him, no longer as a subject for intellectual analysis and explanation, but as overwhelming reality. "I can write no more", he told his companion, "for everything that I have written seems like straw, by comparison with the things which I have now *seen*, and which have been *revealed* to me".'<sup>17</sup>

the ideal of a closed philosophical system. The *Summa* is taken as an example of the claim of human intelligence not only to construct an enclosed system of knowledge, but what is much more, to bring even the truths of revelation into a lucid and closely inter-related structure by means of rational proofs. The historical growth of this false and misleading picture is not easy to follow. No doubt many factors co-operated to produce it, and these factors have acted and reacted on one another. Opponents as well as followers have contributed to the misconception: not only the mistrust of natural reason characteristic of Augustinianism during the Reformation period, but also the efforts of Neo-Scholasticism to preserve its master, Thomas, from every taint or charge of agnosticism are responsible.' (*The Silence of St Thomas*, by Josef Pieper, Faber, 1957.) Anyone inclined to think of thomism as a closed-system philosophy or theology would do well to study the whole of this short but valuable essay.

15 For a commentary on this, see *God and the Unconscious*, by Victor White, O.P., Essay VII, 'Revelation and the Unconscious'. Harvill Press, 1952.

16 'St Thomas Aquinas, at the outset of his *Summa*, insists that the way of rational, scientific and systematic investigation is not the only approach to the understanding of divine things (*Summa* I, I, 6 ad 3); he insists repeatedly that there is also an affective, mystical approach of such sort that the unlettered may attain to an understanding of the truths of faith higher even than that of the most learned and intellectually gifted. It is, he teaches, precisely the function of the indwelling Spirit of God through his sevenfold gifts so to enlighten the individual soul regarding the truths of faith.' (Victor White, O.P., *op. cit.*, page 9.)

17 Victor White, O.P., *op. cit.*, page 139.