

THE APPEAL TO SOUND LEARNING—I

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THE apologetic defence of the central Anglican position, if the extremes of Anglo-Catholic papalism and Protestant fundamentalism are excepted, finds its final justification in an appeal to sound learning. The formula is Bishop Creighton's. It was the application of this principle, he maintained, that brought about the changes made in the English Church in the sixteenth century. Not that the Church of England claims a monopoly of learning, but that it owes its present existence to the fact that the theology and devotional life of Western Christendom, of which up to the Reformation it was an integral part, had become overweighted and distorted in its development, and was maintaining an ecclesiastical system that obscured rather than illustrated the vital principles on which the Christian life is founded.

Efforts at reform from within were defeated because the logical fabric of scholastic theology on which it rested was so strong that it was difficult to deal with it in detail; it was hard to see where reform was to begin or where it was to end. Reforming efforts resulted in a sense of hopeless weariness, and at length it became apparent that reform was only possible by returning to the principles of sound learning. It was these principles that were applied during the formative years of the Reformation, not by any one great leader whose personality impressed itself upon the changes that were made, but by the long process of the aspirations which have sprung from these principles, producing by gradual evolution the formularies, and in particular the Prayer Book, from which the Anglican outlook and ethos derive.¹

Such in brief is Creighton's elucidation of his judgment that 'the formula which most explains the position of the Church of England is that it rests on an appeal to sound learning'. It is an appeal to historical research as the ultimate criterion of what is true and what erroneous in the teaching of the contemporary Church, whatever the term Church may be held to connote. It rejects the supremacy of a living voice in any form, and claims by

¹ Creighton, *The Church and the Nation*, pp. 250-252.

sound learning 'to interpret afresh the sacred text and certify through independent research the true verdict of Christian antiquity'.² It was precisely on this ground that the Church of England under Henry VIII began to challenge the beliefs of the rest of Western Christendom.

In the views of the several schools of thought within the Church of England the actual area of belief upon which the judgment of sound learning may fall varies. Anglo-Catholics of the more conservative kind have their own interpretation of the Anglican appeal to antiquity. For them the Faith is what history shows to have been the belief of the undivided Church. Once the whole Church has endorsed any article of faith as being true, as in the Apostles' and Nicene creeds, this can never again be called in question. Some Anglo-Catholics, in order to approximate the rule of faith to a living voice, would extend this principle to every doctrine taught as *de fide* by the common consent of the divided parts of the Church as it now exists; a part being held to be a Church which has preserved Apostolic succession, the Creeds and the Faith and life of undivided Christendom. This form of consent however breaks down, as a test of true doctrine, on the fundamental question: what is the nature of the Church Christ founded to mediate his authority in the world? Is it divisible by schism, or must its unity be external and hierarchical as well as a unity of truth and sacramental grace?

The Liberal school of thought within the Church of England, which finds a home in Anglo-Catholicism as well as among those who would call themselves Protestant, does not hold tradition to be in any way a final guarantee of the truth of doctrine. It exalts the function of critical reason and the results of historical research as decisive in settling what are to be considered the essential credenda of Christianity. It is much influenced by what is termed the modern scientific outlook, and inclines to limit divine action in the world to its operation through secondary causes in created nature. There are articles of the Creed therefore which are not, in the Liberal view, so sacrosanct as never to be called in question individually, even though the fundamental affirmations of the Creed in its totality are held to be unassailable. Anglican Liberals do not regard the Christian faith as true because its several articles are guaranteed by any kind of *magisterium*, but only in so far as

² H. Hensley Henson, *The Church of England*, p. 59.

its events are held to have been established as historical by critical research, and their interpretation certified as of permanent spiritual value by the experience of the Christian community, which they take in its widest sense as the company of the baptized.³

Within the Liberal school of thought is a group which may be designated Modernist. This group tends to minimize the dependence of doctrine upon fact, and to base it on religious values originating, as they would hold, less in historic actuality than in the experience of the worshipping community. The Evangelicals lay great stress on the paramount role of the Scriptures as basically the self-authenticating and self-interpreting source of divine truth. While certainly not despising historical tradition and critical research as auxiliaries in the interpretation of the biblical message, they give the first place to what are known as the insights of the Reformers. These originated in a re-assessment of the doctrine of grace by the study of the Scriptures independently of tradition, the Word of Christ in the Church. A novel principle was thereby introduced as the ultimate standard of truth, Christ in the Scriptures in judgment over the Church. But Christ in the Scriptures in effect was what 'sound learning' might judge them to say.

Central Anglicanism then, excluding the extremes to which we have referred, accepts the historical criterion of faith implied in Creighton's formula, though each group interprets it with different emphasis. It denies in consequence that the universal Church, in whatever way this term is understood, can possess any endowment of infallibility to make its decisions, as such, immune from error,⁴ but most Anglicans would acknowledge that the credal truths which form the central core of the Christian gospel are to be received and believed with certainty, though they would vary in their estimate as to how many truths are to be so described. The essential contrast between the Anglican and the Catholic attitudes to truth is however a point upon which all central Anglicans would agree. The appeal to sound learning involves the right to satisfy oneself of truth, before the commitment of faith, by evidence intrinsic to it as a historical situation. Roman

³ A Catholic will not deny that the experience of the Christian community, understood in this sense, can be a true and valid experience, the work of the indwelling Spirit. But Christ gives to no community the authority to formulate and teach truth without error, save to the hierarchy of the visible Church in union with its appointed head, St Peter's successor.

⁴ But for an important modification of this position, *vide* E. C. Rich, *Spiritual Authority in the Church of England*, pp. 209-214.

Catholics, they would say, must perforce regard this appeal as a kind of antiquarian research. For them the magisterium of the Church presents the truth authoritatively as God's Word spoken, and calls for the commitment of faith apart from the necessity for any such satisfaction.

Professor H. E. W. Turner sums this up by saying that Anglicans accept a doctrine as authoritative because it appears to be true, and do not believe it to be true simply because it comes to them on authority.⁵ He maintains that since Revelation comes to us, not as a thing in itself, but mediated through the historical process, Faith involves the element of discovery and discernment no less than acceptance or committal. Historical evidence must be the basis of faith in doctrines which depend mainly on historical facts. Stated in this way, and it is a typically Anglican way, the contrast appears to us to be something of a caricature. On one side there seems to be no other ultimate basis for faith than the assured results of critical scholarship, on the other none but an authority which has no real place for examination and enquiry.

It is a caricature because there is an ambiguity in the use of the phrase 'historical evidence' and in the context of the word 'basis'. Many of the doctrines of the Faith do include historical facts, and could not be believed unless these facts were held to be true. The Incarnation includes the fact of Christ's birth, and many other facts in his earthly life. The Atonement includes the event of his death, and the Resurrection the specific nature of his appearances and the fact of the empty tomb. But the knowledge of these facts does not come to us primarily in the same way as the knowledge of other historical facts, by critical study of the evidence. It comes as an element in the Apostolic preaching testified to by chosen witnesses and accepted, not by critical reasoning, but by faith in the living voice of the Church, which faithfully presents that preaching to the contemporary world. Only if *per impossibile* critical history could disprove the truth of a fact included in a revealed doctrine would the truth of the doctrine itself be discredited. But a fact is not disproved because the historical evidence for it lacks complete cogency.

In the Catholic view the living voice of the Church is the expression of its living mind, and the content of that mind is tradition, the Word of God spoken and written. Revealed truth

⁵ *Theology*, May 1951, p. 184.

stands rooted therefore in historical fact, not as certified by human reasoning but as itself revealed by God and received by faith. In this sense, and only in this sense, could a Catholic agree that historical evidence is the basis of faith. The factual content of revealed truths has for immediate basis the historical evidence contained in the Apostolic witness, and this evidence, together with the doctrines themselves to which the facts are integral, their certainty and the faith that accepts them, rests directly, not upon the results of historical research but upon the Word of God revealing. Dr Austin Farrer in his Bampton Lectures writing of the conclusion of St Mark's gospel has said: 'An attempt was made to dispose of his body in the usual way, but when they came back to complete the funeral rites it was no longer to be found—faith knows why'.⁶ Faith knows, but not history. History can only guess. Did they go to the wrong tomb? Had the body been removed? Was it missing because he had indeed returned to it again? The element of discovery and discernment in faith, of which Professor Turner speaks, cannot initiate faith, which is a gift of God, but once faith is accepted it can use reasoning and critical enquiry to support and safeguard revealed truth, to clarify it by correlating one truth with another, and to draw out its fuller implications. This is and always has been an important element in that development of tradition by which the mind of the Church penetrates more deeply into the meaning of the data of revelation, and is thereby continuously enlarged. It was thus during the first ages that the doctrine of the Trinity, and the great Christological truths, emerged in their present form. So far from being mere antiquarian research sound learning is for Catholics part of the very stuff by which the Church's mind is formed and expressed.

Professor Turner's conclusion then that Anglicans regard historical evidence as the basis of faith in doctrines which depend mainly on historical facts is ambiguous. It seems to confuse the faith-evidence resulting from the conviction that God is speaking with the rational evidence sought for by the scientific historian through literary and historical criticism. Dealing in a University Sermon with the definition of the doctrine of the Assumption,⁷

⁶ *The Glass of Vision*, Lecture VIII, p. 138.

⁷ *Theology*, February 1951, *The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. A sermon preached before the University of Oxford, in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, on 17th November, 1950, by the Revd. H. E. W. Turner, Lightfoot Professor of Divinity in the University of Durham and a Canon of Durham Cathedral.

he says: 'We believe in the Virgin birth of our Lord, in his positive sinlessness and his Resurrection and Ascension because of New Testament evidence which we hold to be sufficient'. In which sense does Professor Turner here use the word 'evidence'? If he means the evidence of God's word, this can never be insufficient, for when recognized as such by faith it is self-evidently true. If he means evidence resulting from historical criticism of a kind which can induce rational certainty then, at least on specific points, he is claiming for the New Testament documents a sufficiency of evidential value as history that many Christian historians are unwilling to grant them.

Dr Ramsey, the present Bishop of Durham, calls Dr Kirsopp Lake's book, *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* published in 1907 'the most scientific treatment of the historical problem (of the Resurrection) that has been written in this and perhaps in any language'. He quotes Dr Lake as admitting that in the end a decision in that problem cannot be made without recourse to religious presuppositions. The evidence in itself is inconclusive, the decision we come to on it will rest upon a doctrinal prejudgment. Dr Ramsey himself admits that it would be impossible to discard presuppositions altogether, but he insists that it would be fatal to go behind the methods of historical criticism and rest in doctrinal affirmations. He advocates the fullest use of the technique of literary and historical criticism, the analysis of sources and of the work of editors, to discriminate what he considers reliable and what unreliable and legendary in the New Testament documents. This attenuates the doctrine of inspiration as the Church defines it, and makes belief appear to rest upon the results of critical enquiry, yet he reaches a conclusion consonant with traditional faith. 'The events', he says, 'must be such as account for the Gospel which the Apostles preached and by which the first Christians lived. . . . Thus if the evidence is pointing us towards a Resurrection of an utterly unique sort we will not be incredulous, for the Christ is himself a unique and transcendent fact in history.'⁸

There is an interesting discussion of the relations of faith and evidence in the 'Appreciation', by Dr Austin Farrer, of the debate between Bultmann and some German Liberal theologians about

⁸ *The Resurrection of Christ*. By A. M. Ramsey, Chapter IV, History and Criticism, pp. 51-57.

the question of mythology in the New Testament.⁹ Dr Farrer makes the distinction, to which we have already referred, between 'history' as a science with its reasoning and conclusions, and 'his-tory' as a statement of fact, such as we hold historico-doctrinal facts to be, having no necessary relation to historical method or reason. He illustrates the latter sense very clearly by imagining a clairvoyant who, after stroking the bark of a mulberry tree, should declare it to have been planted by Queen Anne. Bultmann seems to claim that we cannot hold a historico-doctrinal fact on grounds of faith unless it is adequately supported by historical reasoning. In combatting this view Dr Farrer maintains that our faith in Christ inclines us, at certain points, to accept testimony in regard to him about matters of fact which would be inconclusive if offered with regard to any other man. For this reason it is possible through faith and evidence together, and through neither alone, to believe that Christ really and corporeally rose from the dead. The argument seems to be in line with that of Dr Ramsey already quoted. It appears however to involve a confusion. Historico-doctrinal facts can be believed by faith, and independently they can be held, on the showing of critical history, to be probable, though they cannot be proved with full rigour. It is impossible for them to rest on faith and reason combined, because the certainty of faith is of a different nature and order from the rational moral certainty that cogent evidence can produce. Inconclusive evidence clinched by belief in Christ does not become cogent evidence, compelling assent by its intrinsic nature. The critical historian it would seem, working within the limits of his scientific technique, finds the evidence for the bodily Resurrection inconclusive to rational certainty, and acceptance of it on such evidence no more than an opinion. Neither rational certitude nor opinion can add anything to the conviction of faith.

If therefore we accept the truth of the Resurrection by faith, it is not upon the same kind of evidence that leads us to accept other historical conclusions, nor with the same kind of certainty. We believe it as we believe that Christ is God, on the authority of the Word of Christ recorded in the Scriptures, which are in the possession and under the guardianship of the contemporary Church, and are interpreted to us by its living voice. Antecedently

⁹ *Kerygma and Myth*, a theological debate by R. Bultmann and others. Edited by H. W. Bartsch and translated by R. H. Fuller; p. 220.

the New Testament, critically approached, may dispose the intellect for an act of faith in its authority as the Word of Christ. Subsequently it may support us in the belief that to have made such an act of faith is reasonable. In neither case does its intrinsic evidence provide the act itself with motive power. This comes solely from its impact on us as God's Word, and from the gift of supernatural faith in the Church's reading of it. An unbeliever confronted for the first time with the gospels, and aware only that they were claimed by Christians as history, might well receive the conviction of faith entirely without critical knowledge. He would then believe with the utmost certainty in the truth of the facts recorded, not because of historical evidence, but because God's Word had come to him and he had received it with the obedience of faith. Critical study of the evidence in the light of his faith could subsequently support his belief in the facts on the level of history.¹⁰

It is of course possible for one who is separated from the visible unity of the Church, and from the authority of its living voice, to believe by supernatural faith in Christ, and yet to withhold assent from such doctrines as the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, owing to misconceptions about them and because of the insufficiency of the evidence from the point of view of scientific history. Readers of the autobiography of the late Bishop Hensley Henson,¹¹ who have pondered the moving words with which he concludes it, will hardly doubt that here is a genuine response of faith to the Person of Jesus Christ, as God and Saviour, and a passionate belief in the power of his redeeming death. It is clear that this faith rested upon something far more secure than the shaky foundations of critical scholarship, which his doubts and hesitations in that field had left him, and which led him to agnosticism about the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. There is something intrinsic to the Word of God written, even when approached with historical presuppositions destructive in logic of its claims, which can still command assent. Somehow, in ways

¹⁰ A Christian learning that insists on pushing the claims of scientific evidence beyond this point seems to be unsound, even as learning. It deals in the kind of evidence that isolates facts and treats them in abstraction from their circumstances; in this case from their significance for Christ's own mind and the minds of his followers. This was the error at the root of the nineteenth-century criticism which set the Historic Jesus in opposition to the Christ of Faith.

¹¹ *Retrospect of an Unimportant Life*, Vol. III, 'An open letter to a young padre', pp. 380-382.

beyond description or analysis, the authority of Christ has called for the obedience of faith and that obedience has been given. Yet the doubts and hesitations were due to the principle that sound learning alone has power to determine what belongs to God's Word and what to human judgment. Professor Turner finds the evidence for the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection sufficient, for Bishop Hensley Henson it was not so. Who can judge between them? Catholics hold that within the Church God's Word can be heard with certainty and distinguished from man's judgment, and that when heard it leaves no room for doubt.

NOTE—The above article is part of Fr Henry St John's forthcoming study of Christian Unity, to be published by Blackfriars Publications.



NOTICE

THE 'WRITER'S WEEK END' organized under the auspices of BLACKFRIARS will take place at Spode House, Hawkesyard, Rugeley, Staffs, from July 2nd (evening) to July 5th (evening). The general subject will be 'Religion as the Writer's Theme', and the lecturers will include Fr Gerald Vann, O.P., Fr Kenelm Foster, O.P., W. W. Robson (Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford), Roger Sharrock (Lecturer in English at the University of Southampton), Elizabeth Sewell and the Editor of BLACKFRIARS. Early application should be made to The Warden of Spode House at the above address, from whom all details may be obtained.