

THE USE OF THE BIBLE IN MODERN THEOLOGY¹

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MAY I begin by expressing my deep sense of the honour done me by an invitation to deliver a lecture on this very distinguished foundation? Then may I make quite clear that what follows is essentially of the nature of a *ballon d'essai*? My real concern has been to expose a problem, or nexus of problems, so that better minds than mine may be provoked into defining it more adequately and setting about its solution. It was almost impossible to expose the problem clearly without at least hinting at a line of solution, but I should like to emphasize how tentative my proposals are. I think I can already see myself some of the deficiencies and difficulties in what I suggest. If that implies—what is perfectly true—that I venture to come abroad among you in some state of disarray, please take that not as any discourtesy to you but as a sign of the urgency I feel about the need for these problems to be tackled. So much hinges on it.

Had the phrase been more informative I should have liked to call this lecture “the dogma of normativeness”; for when I came across those words some time back in one of the later works of the American scholar Shirley Jackson Case they helped to nucleate the sort of concerns with which this lecture deals. The area in which these lie may be defined as follows.

If anyone asks about the distinctively Christian position or if a question is raised inside the Church about the right belief or attitude in relation to some matter, the answer is almost always determined by reference of some sort to the past. Christians of different traditions and outlooks will define rather differently the precise area or aspect of the past to which they appeal, and correspondingly the form of their appeal will vary somewhat; but it is more or less unanimously agreed that Christianity is a historical religion in the sense implied.

For Anglicans the classic formulation of the matter is in the sixth of the XXXIX Articles: “Holy Scripture containeth all

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 7th of May, 1969.

things necessary to salvation : so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation." For a Roman Catholic, I suppose, the appeal is to the Bible (including the Apocrypha) conceived of as verbally inerrant and supplemented by certain unwritten traditions, mostly believed to derive from apostolic times, the whole being interpreted by an infallible teaching magisterium. From the Reformed side Professor J. K. S. Reid writes¹ that "in the Scriptures of the New Testament [duly interpreted in the light of the Old] nothing is . . . lacking for the nourishment and rule of Christian life and faith". Jackson Case himself puts it rather differently, partly because his book was specifically concerned with Jesus and partly because at the point in question he was discussing the sort of liberal theologian whose appeal to the past is almost exclusively directed to the example and teaching of Jesus. He writes of "a well-nigh universal belief that he [Jesus] had delivered a message and set an example valid for all time. If existing tradition failed to reveal a definite solution to any new issue that might arise, it was the business of the exegete to discover in Jesus an authorized answer to the problem. Hence quite new statements of belief were sometimes formulated, but this evolutionary process of dogma was usually supposed to consist in the mere supplementation of earlier pronouncements. Thus one recovered the correct original ; the truth remained a constant quantum. It had existed historically in Jesus' thought, or indeed in the mind of God before the creation of the world, and now found its proper expression in the language of the most recent orthodox theologian." Probably no one nowadays would use precisely that language, but *mutatis perpaucis mutandis* it would express a widespread contemporary approach ; indeed I suspect we should have to do little more than substitute the words "Biblical revelation", in the quotation, for the name of Jesus. In the Lambeth Conference of 1968, for example, one constantly heard and read statements to the effect that "the biblical revelation is normative".

¹ *The Authority of Scripture*, p. 139.

So much for the area of my concern. The question I ask within it is what such a position commits me to; though I must admit that as I ask that question I have at the back of my mind the further question how far, as a Christian, I am in fact committed to that position.

Perhaps I can most easily draw out the content of my question if you will allow me a little autobiography. As many of you will know, some four or five years ago the World Council of Churches initiated an investigation into current biblical hermeneutics with a view to finding out how far, if at all, differences between denominations and other doctrinal groups corresponded to differences in the methods and assumptions with which they approached the interpretation of the Bible. I was fairly closely identified with the project, both as a member of the organizing committee in Switzerland and as chairman of the northern European working-party. In both groups we made it our practice to begin each session with a joint attempt at the interpretation of some biblical passage and then to reflect on any differences of approach which might have revealed themselves. At one level there were few such differences. We all agreed that if the original text of a passage could be established, the discovery of its original meaning would depend on ability to contextualize it correctly both in the book to which it belonged and in its wider cultural context; and there was virtual unanimity about the detailed philological, lexicographical, historical and other procedures needed for the elucidation of this meaning.

But as the work went on, I became increasingly aware of certain assumptions on the part of many of my colleagues, assumptions which were important because they largely accounted for the zest and sense of urgency they brought to their exegetical work. They assumed, first of all, that when they had discovered the meaning of a passage, they were dealing with a word of God, part of God's self-disclosure to the situation in which the words were originally written or spoken. But more than that, they at least *started* with the assumption that that word of God would also prove to have a contemporary meaning, and that the exegete's task was not completed till he had discovered what it was. To put the distinction in a rough and ready way, the

exegete has not only to answer the question : What it *meant*, but also the question : What it *means*.

A lot of this did not seem to me self-evident. Many statements in ancient texts have *no* meaning today in any normal sense of the word " meaning ". No doubt if you reflect long enough over any ancient statement—even, let us say, an historical inaccuracy in some ancient Egyptian annals—interesting reflections of some sort will occur to you ; but my colleagues seemed to mean something more positive and direct than that. When pressed, they were not prepared to assert it as a universal principle that every biblical statement has a contemporary meaning, but it clearly surprised some of them that the question should be raised as an open one ; and I suppose their attitude is reflected in much contemporary preaching, in which we seek to explicate " *the meaning* " (for today) of a short biblical passage.

Subsequent reading has convinced me that I did not misunderstand my colleagues. Thus Professor Reid, for example, writes¹: " Biblical authority . . . gives meaning to . . . passages commonly neglected as unedifying. What, for example, are we to make of the passages which present the specification of the ark and of the temple, of the detailed legislative regulations in the Book of Exodus, and the long lists of names that occur elsewhere? The answer is that they too bear testimony to the same living and redeeming God." They " do not indeed possess exemplary authority to be obeyed ; but they do have all the authority which God concedes to their testimony ". In these and the surrounding words Professor Reid seems to me to betray some embarrassment, and his embarrassment serves to fortify my own.

This is deepened in another way which I can best explain by means of an illustration. My first initiation into the World Council project was taking part in Switzerland in a joint investigation into the meaning of 1 Thessalonians ii. 16, the verse which speaks (according to the R.V.) of " the wrath " having " come upon the Jews to the uttermost ". As I did my preparation before leaving home, it struck me that this was an odd verse to have chosen ; but as soon as the discussion got under way in

¹ *The Authority of Scripture*, p. 268.

Switzerland I understood the point—an illuminating example, incidentally, of what Bultmann means by his talk about *Vorverständnis*. Many of my continental colleagues were much exercised about the problem of the relationship between Christians and Jews, and the question they were asking was : What does it say about Jewish-Christian relations that Paul spoke of the wrath of God having come on the Jews *εἰς τέλος* ?

I was inclined to reply that it says little or nothing—for I had been persuaded to the view of many English commentators, including such a sober scholar as E. J. Bicknell, that the words were simply what Dr. William Neil calls “ an outburst of exasperation ” on the part of the Apostle, occasioned by treatment he had recently received from Jews in Corinth—with the corollary, presumably, that if the Apostle himself had been taxed with his words a few weeks later he would not have wanted to be held to them as a fully representative expression of his own mind, still less of the mind of Christ. Once again, my colleagues were not prepared to rule out such a possibility on principle, but most of them were clearly very unhappy with it, not least on the ground that it would make it very difficult to be sure in what sense the Bible is, or even contains, the word of God. And once again, subsequent reading has convinced me that my colleagues were not by any means unrepresentative. To cite Professor Reid once more, he frequently uses such words as “ opacity ” and “ distortion ”¹ in connection with the human witnesses of the Old Testament, and to a lesser extent the New ; but his general view seems to be that even where they distort, they distort something that was a genuine word of God to them ; and that if the relevant passages are taken in conjunction with others, the genuine word of God can be descried by us despite the distorting medium.

Am I then committed, as a Christian, to the view that biblical writers can never have been simply wrong for their own times and/or irrelevant for ours ?

The reluctance of many theologians to agree that they can seems to me to be related to another and broader issue. They want each passage to have a meaning because they want the Bible as a whole to have a meaning. There is a body of truth, a faith,

¹ e.g. *The Authority of Scripture*, p. 268.

a gospel to be found in the Bible—something which could be described as *the* meaning of the Bible. Professor Reid conceives it in such a way that he can refer to the sum of its “cardinal and indispensable items and portions”¹; and its existence is the fundamental presupposition of Professor Cunliffe-Jones’s quest in his book on the *Authority of the Biblical Revelation*.

At a time when God was thought of as in a real sense the author of every word of the Bible such a view occasioned no difficulty. It could be supposed that what he sought to do through his words was to communicate a body of truth to men. It was true that, for reasons known only to himself, he had chosen to achieve his purpose in a rather unlooked for way, *πολυμερῶς και πολυτρόπως*, and that therefore a number of various methods, allegorical and other, were needed in order to extract the body of truth; but from New Testament times onward the attempt was continually made and the results were incorporated in creeds, conciliar definitions and the like. Since it was principally in connection with particular controversies that the attempts were made, each creed or definition was only a partial statement, relevant to the particular controverted question which called it forth; but still, so far as it went, it encapsulated *the* biblical truth on its subject and provided guidance for further biblical interpretation. And there seemed no reason to doubt that subsequent situations and uncertainties would call forth statements of further items and portions of the Biblical truth which in principle, at any rate, was presumably capable of exhaustive statement in doctrinal terms.

Such a view was tenable even by those who, like Luther, did not hold a completely mechanical view of Biblical inspiration. Given the circumstances of his day, Luther’s hopes are readily intelligible. Granted the assumption, common to him and his opponents, that some single external and objective criterion of doctrine was necessary; and that it was not to be found in the Pope; and granted the exciting prospect that, with the invention of printing and the spread of education, the Bible would find its way into the hands of more and more readers, Luther’s confidence that the Scripture itself by the illumination of the Holy Spirit

¹ *The Authority of Scripture*, p. 130.

would say the same thing to all fair-minded readers was natural enough.

But, however natural, it was unjustified ; contrary to the usual view, Melanchthon was shrewder on this point than his master. The difficulty of *his* position, however, becomes clear as one reads in a book such as Professor Owen Chadwick's *From Bossuet to Newman* what bizarre logical procedures were involved in the attempts of post-reformation theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, to evoke from the Bible a coherent series of answers to the questions which troubled them, by the application of "reason" as they understood it.

But if such a view occasioned no difficulty on an older view of the Bible, things are surely different on a modern view, which makes full allowance for the individuality of the human authors and the peculiar literary forms of what they wrote.

Modern literary critics are agreed about the impropriety of trying to isolate and state "*the meaning*" of the type of writing they study. Thus Professor Helen Gardner, for example, praises Miss Mary Lascelles's book on *Measure for Measure* precisely on the ground that she makes no attempt in it to "arrive finally at '*the meaning of Measure for Measure*'. She has been content to leave the play more meaningful than it was before we read her study". Those words are a quotation¹ and they refer, be it noted, to a single dramatic work by a single author. The Bible too contains dramatic work and it contains much poetry, parable and what I may call symbolic writing of many other kinds ; it was composed over a period of a millennium or more by many writers of very different characters, beliefs and cultural backgrounds. If nevertheless we are to maintain that there is something which can be called "*the meaning*" of the Bible that will surely be an act of faith ; the existence in the Bible of such a coherent meaning will be due to the providential activity of God, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit will be necessary in order to discover what it is.

It is well that we should know what we are committed to, and I confess that I should have regarded this last point as

¹ *The Limits of Literary Criticism* (1956), pp. 60-61.

self-evident had I not come across the following passage in a book by Professors R. P. C. Hanson and R. H. Fuller: "The Bible", they write, "contains the whole of the only tradition of doctrine which the primitive Church required its members to believe as necessary to salvation. . . . It is a stupid insult to the memory of the four evangelists and of St Paul and the other apostolic writers, to suggest that they failed in the first aim of their writings, which was to convey the meaning of the Christian gospel to their hearers. . . ." ¹ Am I wrong in thinking that these words embody a serious *non sequitur*? Surely the New Testament writers did *not* have it as their explicit aim to "convey the meaning of the Christian gospel" in the sense suggested in this quotation, namely to communicate the whole tradition of doctrine necessary to salvation. Indeed, if we stop to think about it, the whole notion is absurd. Are we to think of St. Paul saying to himself: "I am sure the evangelists and my other New Testament successors are going to omit such and such a vital element in the tradition; therefore I must take care to include it in one of my epistles which I am sure will be preserved to posterity"? Or are we to think of the author of 2 Peter carefully examining the work of his New Testament predecessors for vital omissions, conscious that the biblical canon was fast approaching its final form?

No, the fact is that to outward, human, seeming the Bible, and even the New Testament, does not look like a book which conveys a single coherent body of truth; and if we are to think along such lines, we should surely have to regard Monsignor Ronald Knox as nearer the truth when he writes of "the scarce literary relics that have come down to us from the first two centuries", and says, "you cannot expect every single element of that tradition to appear in written form." ²

At this point I think I know what I shall be told, namely that I am involved in unnecessary difficulties because I am looking at the matter in a way that is too purely verbal and literary. "The revelation", you will say, "was not *about* God, it was a revelation *of* God, and it was given not in propositions but in events, or

¹ *The Church of Rome*, p. 95.

² *The Belief of Catholics*, p. 138.

maybe in a person. The unity or coherence of the biblical literature lies in the fact that it all, in one way or another, witnesses to the events in which God's self-disclosure took place."

Obviously such a view affords a good deal of relief and I am sure it contains much truth. To begin with, it works with a model readily intelligible from everyday life. A man, let us say, has an accident and injures his knee. The doctors operate and carry out post-operational treatment. They then tell the man that there are certain things he must do, for example certain exercises, and other things he must not do, for example climb mountains. In short, he must live in a way appropriate to the situation created by their healing activities; and if he does not, painful consequences will follow. Somewhat analogously, God has performed a unified series of saving acts in history in order to reveal Himself to us, the God with whom we have to deal, and to create the situation in which free and healthy dealings with Him are possible. To be a Christian is to live before the God thus revealed in the way appropriate to the situation He has created.

If we look at it like that, there is no obvious reason why God should have infringed the liberty of the human witnesses to the degree necessary to achieve absolute economy and accuracy in the biblical testimony; and such a view can thus easily allow for erroneous, irrelevant and even downright irresponsible statements in the Bible. Its champions will add that it has the further advantage of being broadly the way in which the Bible understands itself.

Over this last statement certain difficulties begin to arise for me. I feel that only by something of a *tour de force* can all the biblical literature be brought under this viewpoint, and I am not sure that the biblical writers themselves saw things in terms of a series of "mighty acts of God in history" to anything like the extent that is often suggested nowadays; I am not even sure that the words *μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ* (Acts ii. 11) are correctly translated "mighty works of God". Even so far as New Testament writers did think in that way, modern exponents of this view seem to me to be involved in a "scandal of particularity" quite other and greater than they were. For the New Testament writers, God had been active in a *heilsgeschichtlich* way

throughout the world's history from creation day to Doomsday ; for remember that, to a man, they believed that, whatever else God had done in Christ, he had brought very close the end of this world and of history as we know it. For modern exponents of this view, on the other hand, *Heilsgeschichte* did not begin until millions of years after the original creative act, and it finished, in the full sense, at least 2,000, and possibly many million, years before the close of human history. This is a "scandal of particularity" indeed, and it seems to give to long periods of history what I might perhaps call a certain vacuous character.

To this I shall return later, but meanwhile I have certain other questions about this position. As the analogy of the knee operation was intended to suggest, the plausibility of the view we are discussing depends on our ability to pinpoint what it was that God was doing through his mighty acts, and so to define what is the appropriate response to it. Doctors can describe to a patient exactly what they have done to his knee, they can prescribe the precise regimen he is to follow and, if need be, they can show why the one necessitates the other. It is, I suppose, some such model as this that theologians like Anselm sought to follow in their attempts to construct a theology of atonement on the basis of the biblical revelation. But in more modern times it has been increasingly realized that language about the mighty acts of God in history is nothing like as simple and objective as might at first appear. To speak in this way is not to speak objectively in the sense in which we can speak objectively about doctors operating on someone's knee, or even, say, about certain historical events having great significance for Russian economic history. To speak of mighty acts of God is to offer a theological—and in an important sense, a subjective—interpretation of certain historical events. It is, as one writer has put it, to "throw out human ideas toward the ineffable revelation of God"¹ in certain historical events. You may say that the events in question were such as to demand—or at least legitimate—interpretation in such terms ; and you may also say that the terms—or images—in question were selected under the guidance of the

¹ C. C. Morrison : *What is Christianity ?*, e.g. p. 191.

spirit. But in either case the fact will remain that they were human terms and images and as such inevitably inadequate to their task and, if they were to be intelligible, rooted—or must I say “contextualized”—in the culture peculiar to a particular time and place. We are told, quite justifiably, that we have no right to deny *a priori* that God may have intervened in history in special ways, and even signalized his interventions by breaches of the natural law; but we are still bound in integrity to ask whether if we, with our twentieth-century background, had been there, we should have felt the historical events in question to demand any explanation in supernatural terms; and we can be sure that if so, the terms we should have used would not have been the ones used by the biblical writers. This type of approach is thus faced fairly and squarely with the whole complex of basic problems that lie behind Bultmann’s suggestions about demythologization. I know of course that these problems are much older than Bultmann and that not only Bultmann, but Leonard Hodgson, John Knox, Austin Farrer and many others have made suggestions for dealing with them. I am not concerned now to describe or assess these suggestions; my point is only that on any of them—or at least any known to me—you can only extract revelation from the Bible when you have decided on the terms in which you are going to “translate”, or “demythologize”, or understand, the biblical terms and images; and that means allowing your contemporary statement of the faith to be determined by facts and considerations not directly derived from the Bible at all. The gospel we preach today may be “out” of the Bible, but if so it is “by” *some Vorverständnis*. The Bible is thus normative for preaching in a rather special and indeterminate sense, and it is this to which Barth objects as being incompatible with the *sola scriptura*. Certainly there is here, I think, an important break with the traditional approach to the Bible, but before I come to Barth I should like to make two further points.

First, the direct practical relevance of the issues involved. The aim of the preacher is to make clear to men the nature of the God with whom they have to deal and the appropriate way of dealing with Him, or opening themselves to be dealt with by

Him. In the light of the above considerations, what are they to say on these topics? Clearly the God in question is not one who plans to close history in the next thirty or forty years, as the New Testament writers say; nor, *pace* Professor Cullmann, is He a God who has won a decisive encounter with personal demonic forces and is now engaged in mopping-up operations, as the New Testament writers say. Is he then, as they say, a God who is interested in sacrifice of some sort as a necessary precondition of forgiveness; does he reject all who do not believe, and if so, in what sense of "believe"; is He in fact a God who rejects anyone? Competent and believing theologians would answer all these questions in very different ways. What does that suggest about the nature of the Biblical revelation as an objective norm?

Secondly, I should like to suggest that what may seem a different way of dealing with our question is not as different as it seems. I am thinking of the work of scholars who do not profess to take the biblical account and interpretation of God's acts at their face value, but seek, as it were, to read between the lines of the Bible. Using modern scholarly methods to set the various authors and documents in their original contexts, they try to discern for themselves what God was seeking to do in the events as they reconstruct and understand them. Such attempts have been frequent in modern times and if I single out as an example Professor Dodd's book *The Authority of the Bible* that is because it seems to me supereminent of its kind. It is indeed a magisterial work, to which I owe much; yet even in its revised form, it is by now unmistakably dated. And if one asks why, is not the answer that in the last resort Dodd's procedure is the same as that of Bultmann or Hodgson, though he has carried it through in a different manner? He is more generous than Bultmann in his estimate of what the man on the Clapham omnibus can accept with integrity, and he wisely refrains from any attempt such as Bultmann makes to list summarily what such a man does, and cannot, believe. But a close study of his book shows that his argument rests on certain assumptions about these matters and the overall validity of his conclusions stands or falls with the correctness or incorrectness of these assumptions. So we may

yet awake one morning to discover from the bookseller's catalogue that Barth left a draft entitled : *Charles Dodd : Ein Versuch ihn zu verstehen !*

It is of course precisely with the sort of questions I am raising that Barth himself wrestled for so many years. His view, as I understand it, could be put briefly, if frivolously, like this : The serious Bible reader seeks to learn by listening-in on saving dialogues which took place between God and certain groups and individuals in the past. The exegete is like a fly on the wall of a room in which a wise spiritual director wrestles with the problems of a series of tormented souls. As he listens, the fly learns more and more both of the character and dimensions of the human problem and also about the mind and policy of the director towards them. Gradually but surely, the problems of the fly himself and the mind of the director towards him and his situation are established and revealed. Of course such language does the greatest injustice to Barth, not least to the vital part he assigns to the working of the Spirit and the authority of the community in making the biblical revelation contemporary ; but perhaps it may serve as the basis of a brief critique.

The strength of this position is supposed to be that according to it purely human assumptions are in no way normative ; no "pre-understandings", conditioned by the cultures of a fallen world, enter in as distorting media, and so the revelation is the pure word of God. My difficulties about this are the well known ones and so can be stated summarily. In the first place the ideal seems unattainable, and in his lectures I understand that Barth admitted in effect that he had not attained it. The *Dogmatics* is unmistakably a mid-twentieth century, West-European, Protestant production ; the illuminating section on *Das Nichtige*, for instance, may owe its initiation to Genesis i. 2, but it could never have been what it is but for certain strands in twentieth-century continental philosophy. I cannot forbear to quote the revealing comment of Professor A. B. Come, a definite, if discriminating, Barthian¹: " In Barth's concept of *Nichtige* . . . we have one of those theological insights which *is nowhere explicitly spelled out in Scripture* (italics mine) but . . . is arrived at by our intuition of

¹ *An Introduction to Barth's Dogmatics for Preachers*, p. 219.

the whole". My difficulty is to see that so far as this matter goes there is any basic issue at stake in the controversy between Barth and Bultmann. It is true that Barth is more eclectic in his approach towards modern attitudes and philosophies than is Bultmann—at any rate the Bultmann Barth sees; he may change his spectacles more often, but it surely remains true that the Gospel he, or any other, derives from the Bible depends on the spectacles through which they read the text. It could, of course, be argued that in the particular case of Barth the eclectic choice of interpretative categories is more or less completely appropriate as a result of guidance by the Holy Spirit. But such a claim would be arbitrary, and for us outside the charmed circle the stubborn fact would remain that when Barth listened in, for example, to that part of God's dialogue with men represented by Matthew xvi. 18 ff. one thing was revealed to him, whereas when Cardinal Heenan listens with equal seriousness—well, nowadays I am not quite sure what is revealed; but even now I think something different from Barth's understanding.

One subsidiary point before I turn to another aspect of the matter. It would appear that on all the modern views I have been discussing (including Barth's, if he means what he says) the discovery of the supposed normative revelation depends on a knowledge of the detailed circumstances of the biblical peoples and writers such as only a professional, or at any rate semi-professional, could hope to possess. I am not quite sure what that says for the traditional doctrine of normativeness. Does it perhaps mean that the Bible is not, after all, a book who runs may read, but that the elucidation of the normative revelation is a special vocation of Christians with a bent and leisure for it?

May I now turn abruptly and briefly to look at the matter from another angle? What are the questions currently agitating the Church to which, on the traditional view, a normative answer could reasonably have been looked for? To anyone who attended the Lambeth Conference of 1968 one obvious example is the question whether women can or should be ordained to the priesthood. It is perhaps significant that after the most careful study of the question by competent theologians, and discussion by the

bishops at the conference, the conclusion was reached that "theological considerations are inconclusive"; that is to say, whatever else it says, that on this matter the biblical revelation is not normative. Such a question may perhaps be dismissed—though if so, wrongly—as a thing indifferent, as if the man who had the operation on his knee should write to the doctors to ask if he might waggle his little finger, and receive no reply. But what if the question should be pressed whether we need priests at all—at any rate in the sense of people who have received the imposition of episcopal hands and thereby indelible "character"? Is it not possible that here too, not perhaps "theological considerations", but biblical evidence would prove inconclusive? And what about the questions increasingly being raised in some quarters about the permanent adequacy and validity of traditional statements about the Trinity and their relation to Christology? Or, to go still nearer the heart of the matter, what about the questions raised by Dr. John Robinson and others about the right way of understanding the transcendent, or by Professors Braithwaite, van Buren *et hoc genus omne* about the meaningfulness or propriety of any talk about the supernatural? It is, I hope, clear that I am not agreeing with, or even assessing, anyone's views in these areas; my question is simply whether "the biblical revelation" could possibly be normative in these fields, since in each case the question at issue is precisely the possibility or propriety of understanding things in the twentieth century in the way the biblical writers understood them in the second and first and earlier centuries.

The question of course is no new one and a way of answering it that seems increasingly popular is to say that the Church must learn to travel lighter and to jettison a lot of the doctrinal baggage it has carried in the past. Many tenets—so the argument runs—which seemed in the past to be guaranteed by the biblical revelation are now seen to have been largely the result of "non-theological factors"; and we must learn to be less dogmatic, not only about the number of angels who can dance on the point of a needle, but about the inner structure of the divine existence, the mode of operation of the atonement and a lot else besides. This type of answer may well be the right one, but, at any rate in the

forms in which I have met it, it usually seems to go with a conviction that there are still some areas in which a normative revelation can be expected, and should be sought, in something like the traditional manner. It is sometimes suggested, e.g. that belief that divinity once became incarnate is still an *articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae*. I want to ask—and I do it very tentatively—whether this may not involve something like the fallacy of the “god of the gaps” and whether we should not do better to explore the possibility of giving up the dogma of normativeness in its traditional form altogether, as Jackson Case suggested.

Would this mean the end of Christianity as we know it—Christianity as a revealed religion? Should I as a preacher be simply a particular type of adult education lecturer, distinguished from my hearers only by the fact that I have had more time and leisure than most of them for reflection on religious questions?

Certainly I had to admit to my colleagues in the World Council project that I often preach without a text or on a text from a non-biblical writer, Kierkegaard, for example, or even, on occasions Katherine Whitehorn! And I have to admit to myself that the spirit of my sermons is very much that expressed in Leonard Hodgson’s formula: “This is how *I* see it; can *you* not see it like that as well?”

But still, I have to ask myself *why* “this is how I see it” rather than some other way. I was myself brought up as a Christian, though I think that affects only the form, and not the substance, of what I want to say. It means that from the earliest age I was brought to adopt a stance, a stance towards God, the world, history, the neighbour, the church—and I should like to be able to say everything else; in fact, of course, not all areas of my personality were integrated into this stance and I have suffered much as a result. But much more was involved than just the intellect; to do justice to the matter I should have to use language about the emotions, commitment and much else besides consciously held intellectual convictions. My original formation was in an extreme evangelical Anglican tradition, crossed with a strong streak of Pelagianism, and over the years I have, partly consciously and partly unconsciously, modified my stance, moving, as I believe, towards a more centrally and

characteristically Christian position, which is yet unmistakably only a variant of the one basic stance.

I realize, needless to say, that at any time my whole understanding of myself and my stance may be called in question by the disciples of Karl Marx or Professor Ayer or anybody else. So far as this has happened, or happens, I think I know what I must do—try to understand the objections, consider the possibility of their validity and, if honestly moved to do so, try to meet them on their own (philosophical) grounds—which is not necessarily the same thing as their own terms. It is partly the attempt to do that which has led to some modification of my stance.

Yet this does not seem to me the central issue this afternoon, which is how I came to adopt my original stance and to alter it to my present one. Obviously I did not argue myself into it, and argument has been only one factor in the modification of it. Equally it is only to a minimal degree the fruit of unmediated private experience, whether “religious” or of any other kind. Nor does it come directly from the Bible; even those very rare people (the Susie Youngers of this world) who, coming out of a non-religious background, are apparently converted simply by private reading of the Bible, do not in fact start their reading “from cold”. Their understanding of the Bible is mediated through the countless ways in which our culture is still moulded by the Christian community.

Which surely brings us to the crux of the matter. My stance was derived—partly through my family—from the Christian community and it is basically under influence of various sorts within the community that it has been modified.

Where then did the community get the stance it gave me? Which in turn involves the question where did the community get its origin—a question with endless ramifications. One obvious answer is from Jesus, or, as I should prefer to say, from the Christ-event. As you will know, I am by no means sure where precisely in the New Testament story the balance lies between Jesus himself and the beliefs of his earliest followers. But I could not be a Christian unless I believed that the balance could be struck in *some* such way that it is plausible to see the New Testament story as a cardinal item in God’s self-disclosure to men.

Yet on any showing we cannot stop our search at the Christ-event. It could not have been what it was except in the already existing Jewish community ; indeed, looked at from one point of view, it was precisely a re-formation of that community.

Yet again, we cannot stop with the Old Testament community, for modern scholarship shows us how much it in turn owed to the Babylonians, and to other communities and beliefs earlier than its distinctive emergence. And all down its history, before, at, and after its re-formation, this community has owed much to elements derived from other communities and beliefs.

Can we then say anything else than that the community owes its existence to God ? And does that allow us to say that the community is the revelation—or at least the locus or source of revelation ?

Can we, or should we, try to pin-point some special locus of divine action and self-disclosure within its history ? That is clearly a question with extremely wide ramifications, Christological, soteriological and of many other kinds ; a great deal depends on how it is understood. According to the letter of the New Testament, in “ the things concerning Jesus ” God was active, as it were, behind the natural scenes carrying through certain transactions between the natural and the supernatural which permanently and once for all set their relationship upon a new basis. Without going all the way with Charles Clayton Morrison¹ and saying that all such pictures are in the last resort gnostic and docetic and belie the truly historical character of Christianity, I am not quite sure that even the most faithful Christian in the twentieth century is committed to them.

But someone will object : surely the Lord’s resurrection was something as objective, decisive and once-for-all as could well be conceived. Once again, much depends on how the matter is looked at ; on what you think happened and how you understand it. I would venture to suggest that essentially the Resurrection *can* be understood as the initiating by God of a new relationship with Himself which we still call life “ in Christ ”, however precisely we should “ unpack ” that phrase if asked to do so. I suggest it could be unpacked in a way that would not commit us

¹ Op. cit.

to the particular dynamics suggested in the New Testament, or to Jackson Case's "constant quantum of truth" which can subsequently only be clarified and explicated. We who are no longer tied to the eschatological perspective of the fourth evangelist can perhaps assign to the Holy Spirit a broader role in this connection than simply that of taking the things of the incarnate Christ and declaring them unto us (John xvi. 14).

Can we not maintain the possibility and reality of a relationship with God which would have been impossible without the Old Testament community and the Christ-event; which is the true descendant of that relationship which St. Paul categorized as life "in Christ", though in the course of the Church's life since, and under the influence of the Holy Spirit, it has come, and is coming, to be differently conceived and differently—and even perhaps more profoundly—lived?

It is, I think, worth noting that Karl Barth, of all people, at least twice in his *Dogmatics* discusses the theoretical possibility that God might have adopted modes of revelation different from the one to which, on Barth's own view, he has in fact exclusively confined himself.

In one place he envisages the possibility that revelation might have been laid up for us, as it were, within human nature itself, and so taken the form of a "timeless essential state of man himself, namely his relationship to the eternal and absolute", in which case proclamation would have been a process of *anamnesis*—a "heart searching", by which a neglected or hidden part of human nature would be re-discovered and unfolded.¹

More apposite for us is the following statement²:

'. . . it might also have pleased God to give His Church the canon in the form of an unwritten prophetic and apostolic tradition, propagating itself from spirit to spirit and from mouth to mouth. It will not be disputed that there is something of this kind in the Church apart from the real canon. But it would have to be said that, so far as it had pleased God to make this unwritten spiritual-oral tradition the canon of His Church, the canon would be as faintly distinguishable from the life of the Church, as we can distinguish the blood of our fathers which flows in our veins from our own blood; in other words, the Church is . . . left to her solitary self and concentrated upon herself, upon her own aliveness."

Precisely. But in the former quotation Barth simply

¹ *Dogmatics*, 1/1, 111 f.

² *Ibid.* 1/1, 117.

concludes with the bald statement : “ in fact the matter has been contrived differently ” (he does not say how he knows), and after the second passage he writes : “ Whatever of such spiritual-oral tradition there may be in the Church, obviously it cannot possess the character of an authority irremovably confronting the Church. In the unwritten tradition the Church is not addressed, but is engaged in a dialogue with herself.” With all due respect, do not these quotations beg the question? Barth nowhere, so far as I know, considers the possibility that God may have chosen to work through a combination of all three of these modes ; and that is because he does not consider the possibility—which is precisely the question at issue—that God does not *wish* His self-revelation to “ possess the character of an authority irremovably confronting the Church ”. What if God, taking history really seriously, actually *wants* the Church to be “ engaged in a dialogue with herself ” ?

Needless to say, I can see that such a position bristles with difficulties. For brevity's sake I conclude with a brief reference to just two of these.

First, the Bible: it is simply a historical fact that at all periods of the community's history—before and after its re-formation—some members of it have been moved to give written expression to some aspects of its life and experience, setting down accounts of certain events and their meditations upon their meaning, in prophetic, poetic, parabolic and many other forms. Certain of these writings have won such esteem with the community as to become authoritative in a special sense, though different writers have approved themselves in this way at different times and in different sections of the community.

We habitually think of all this as providential—on the whole, I believe rightly ; though at the same time I can well understand why the question of the canon is becoming increasingly problematic in some quarters, why an eminent, and by no means extreme, English theologian was moved to speak recently of “ the curse of the canon ” or why Robert Henry Lightfoot in an uncharacteristic moment of self-revelation once shared with me his uncertainty whether the production of the first gospel may not have

been “ the first serious failure of nerve on the part of the infant Church ”.

Still, it is easy to see why, at least by the permissive will of God, the scriptures have come to enjoy the esteem they have, and will continue to do so. You will all have had again and again the experience the Church has had—and I certainly have constantly—of finding that it is only as you go back to the Bible that you regain your balance, as Sir Edwyn Hoskyns put it¹—your unfaith is rebuked, your fears and frettings removed, your path made clear. Yet does all this require more than a basically Coleridgean explanation—provided it be in community, as well as individual terms? Does it necessitate any dogma of normativeness in the sense in which I have been understanding the phrase?²

Then finally the problem of a criterion. “ In effect ”, it will be said, “ the line you are following is that of Newman and Karl Adams, if not indeed of Loisy and Tyrrell ; this is a theology of the acorn growing into the oak, a theology of development, and the fatal difficulty of all such theologies is that of distinguishing true development from false ”. “ You speak of ‘ the community ’ ”, it will be asked, “ but where, amid all the variety of denominations, is this community to be found? ” My answer to all that has been hinted at in my remarks about Barth. I confess that I have never been much moved by this type of objection, even when forcibly and plausibly expressed as it was for example by Oliver Quick. And so far as I can tell, the reason is this : whatever may be said in theory, I do not believe the Church ever does, or ever can, settle its questions by reference to some allegedly external and objective norm. I simply do not believe, for example, that by reference to any such

¹ *Cambridge Sermons*, p. 70.

² Since writing these words I have come across the following in the so-called “ Dutch Catechism ” of the Roman Catholic Church (*E.T.*, p. 487): “ this is . . . the place to say something which should be understood as said at many other places of this book. It is that this catechism tries to expound clearly the living truth of faith. But there is more force, life, truth and authenticity in the pages of the Bible. *The pages of the Bible seem to glow with the warmth of faith, experience and divine revelation, with the warmth of Jesus’s own words. Very often the Bible does not explain—it simply impinges on one, in the way that life itself makes its impact,*” cf. Coleridge. (Italics mine.)

norm, knock-down arguments can be produced to prove the Methodists right against the Congregationalists, or both of them right or wrong against the Orthodox. That is just not the way it works; we are dealing with something which is essentially *solvendum ambulando*, which means, according to the good old Hebrew understanding of *ambulare, credendo, precando et vivendo* at least as much as *biblia sacra legendo*.

On the principle that "he that is not against us is for us" (Mark ix. 40) I am more than content to live in communion with Professors Braithwaite, van Buren, Altizer and the rest—from whom indeed I am sure I have much to learn—because as I live and worship with them and my other fellow Christians, in the community, under the power of the Spirit, I am convinced that most of us have meat to eat that these thinkers wot not of, and that there are dimensions of our common life and worship to which the views they hold—or think they hold—fail to do justice. Is it not in terms of such considerations that we must deal with their views, and the views of the countless other "way out" Christians who will no doubt follow them as the years go by; and not by attempted reference to alleged objective norms from which logically irrefragable positions can be derived? *As such a norm*—though not necessarily in any other way—the Christ of 2,000 years ago is already problematic. What will be the case with the Christ of 2,000,000,000 years ago? That is a question theologians should not ignore, for we are quite credibly informed that the human race may yet have 2,000,000,000 years to go. When the Lord then comes will He find "*the faith*" on the earth? Do we really expect Him to?