The Basis of Authority In Christianity

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The average man of our modern era tends to be exceedingly skittish at the mention of the word ‘authority.’ Modern thought has tended to consider itself a law unto itself; nothing has been less palatable than an insistence upon the validity of an external authority superior to the human mind. More distasteful still has been any mention of a normative divine standard, by which the thought and actions of men may and must be judged.

That system of thinking loosely labeled ‘Modernism’ has crept up on our age so gradually that well-meaning people are in danger of overlooking its real character as a revolt against authority of any kind. Among its techniques has been its linking of one element which is obviously false, with another which it dislikes, with the purpose of discrediting the latter. Illustrative of this method is the statement frequently made, that man ought to submit to no authority, whether “of an institution or a book.” This is an attempt to place the Protestant view of authority as residing in the Bible, alongside the Catholic view of authority as residing in the Church, and make it appear that the former is parallel to the latter, and that Bible-believing Protestants are blind in following the Book in the same sense that Catholics are blind in following the tradition of the Church.

I

In order to clarify the issue before us, the writer takes this occasion to speak briefly of the Catholic conception of religious authority. The crystallization of the Church of Rome in the Middle Ages was marked by the emergence of a new emphasis upon tradition as a basis for authority. It was Vincent of Lirinum who formulated the classic definition of the true Christian tradition: “We must be sure that we hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” Of the three Latin terms which occur in this formulation, namely ubique, semper and ab omnibus, it may be said that they primarily emphasize universality. Growing out of the pretensions of Rome to catholicity, they opened the door to what we deem to be a flood of errors. In theory at least, tradition was placed on the same level with Scripture; declarations of duly convened synods of the Church, pronouncements of Popes, of great scholars, of mystics and of monks—all were recognized as part of an authoritative revelation.

The chaos which resulted from this view of authority was pointed out by Abelard’s Sic et Non, in which he arranged in parallel columns the opinions of ecumenical councils, the Fathers, and other notables of the Church. This demonstrated the contradictory nature of the ‘tradition’; but Abelard’s work fell flat to the ground, as did that of Stephen Gobarus in the Eastern Church. This chaos continued to be unresolved; the scholastics cited statements from this nondescript tradition, though it needs to be said that such men as Thomas Aquinas were disciplined in their selection of the citations by which they sought to establish their positions.

For reform was glaring. At the Council of Basel (1428-52) Nicholas of Cusa gave a turn to the Catholic dogma of traditional authority which it maintains
to the present, namely, that the unity of the Church, rather than her universality, should be the determining feature of the tradition. This unity was in due time interpreted to be symbolized by the Pope. This was formulated at the Council of Trent, whose declaration of April 8, 1546 was to the point that Authority resided in both Scripture and tradition, and that the interpretation of Scripture must be made in the light of, and under regulation of, tradition,—of which the Pope was the mouthpiece. This pronouncement was obviously aimed at the Reformation; Luther had made it clear at Worms that tradition could be tolerated only when it was in the clearest conformity with Scripture. It was at this point that the far-reaching vision and the indomitable courage of the Oak of Saxony was most evident.

Perhaps sufficient has been said to indicate that one of the unbridgeable chasms between Catholicism and Protestantism is that between the Romanist view of authority as residing in the Church and mediated through the supposed Vicar of Christ,—and the Protestant view of authority as resting in the Bible alone. It needs to be pointed out in passing that the second imposes no intolerable burden upon the obedient mind. Nevertheless, it has become typical of so-called modern thought to caricature the orthodox Protestant view of authority as submission to a ‘paper Pope,’ as bibliolatry, or as blind submission to a book given by a dictaphonic inspiration.

Before proceeding to a consideration of the authority of the Christian Scriptures, it is well for us to briefly consider the question of authority in general, and then to review the attempts which have been made to locate religious authority outside the Bible.

II

Unless we allow that man, and more specifically the individual man, is autonomous we must allow for some type of extrinsic authority upon him. In practice all men live under some authority; the most picturesque type is that authority which one person exercises upon another. Sometimes this takes the form of pedagogical authority; without such institutions as home and school would be impossible. Children must begin with confidence in others. Knowledge begins with faith; we never completely get away from this rule of human life. The acceptance of some such authority is an inescapable factor in our growth and progress. All through life we must depend upon the opinions of specialists in very many avenues of our experience.

A second form of authority is that which is exerted upon us by virtue of our social relationships. Social pressure requires us to do a great many things for which there is no really valid requirements in the nature of mere utility. Some of us are now wearing absurd and uncomfortable stricures about our necks, called collars, held together by more-or-less absurd pieces of fabric called neckties. No written law compels us to do so dress; but there is a compulsion of the social group which dictates such things. We are under an authority which has subtle but strong ways of enforcing its demands. Many who loudly disclaim any external authority are the most scrupulous in conforming to the dictates of custom. A. J. Balfour finds this to be the most characteristic hallmark of man.

. . . if we would find the quality in which we most notably excel the brute creation, we should look for it, not so much in our faculty of confirming and being convinced by the exercise of reasoning, as in our capacity of authority.\(^1\)

Above these two forms of authority, the first of which corrects our imma-

turity and the second of which curbs our egoistic tendency, stands the religious authority. (We use this term to connote the authority which purports to give an infallible standard for the religious and moral life, coming to us from above and without.) Now, there is some authority in every sphere of activity. Science, Government, the Arts,—all have their authorities. As ordinarily used, the term 'authority' implies some coerciveness, some power to enforce obedience. A little reflection will indicate to each of us that authority must be operative in the field of belief. This does not mean that it is a tyrant, compelling blind and unreasoning submission. It is in the nature of all authority that it seeks to establish its right to command; it must be prepared to justify itself, and in so doing it appeals to man's reason. Its ultimate aim is to constrain belief, and to influence action. Religious authority embodies all these characteristics.

The subject-matter of religion is of such a character as to render some type of certainty exceedingly vital, if not indeed imperative. Beyond the reality accessible to us through the senses is an area or realm of spirit, to which all are more or less sensitive. Within this realm fall the most serious interests in life. Most men are unwilling to rest content with uncertainty at the point of the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the destiny of the individual after death. Inasmuch as the answers to these vital questions are beyond discovery by sense experience, some other basis for assurance is deeply desired by the majorities of men.

Multitudes have sensed, furthermore, that some of these questions are beyond the range of answer by the efforts of the human mind. Religious certainty must thus come, if at all, from a divine revelation. When the rise of the rationalistic movement, commonly associated with the Church as an institution became untenable to the body known as Protestants, they were driven to examine again the claim of the Bible as an embodiment of God's sure Word. It is our purpose to consider this claim in the final section of this article. But before proceeding to this, we ought in the interest of clarity to consider the attempts which have been made to establish a source of religious authority outside the Christian Scriptures.

In the classic Christian view, revelation was held to come to man from without. It was an objective thing, given to man. The source of authority was ultimately God; upon this the Catholic and Protestant views were in agreement, in spite of the radical differences noted earlier. When Luther refused to accept the Church as the mouthpiece of God, he did so as a result of his prior break with Rome upon its concept of salvation as mediated through the Church. This, however, was a body blow at ecclesiastical authority, and was recognized as such by Rome. Some have held that Luther at first had no intention of substituting the Bible for the Church as the seat of authority, but merely emphasized a vague "gospel of God's forgiving love in Christ" without desiring to exalt the Bible as Word of God in the orthodox sense. This is to make the Reformation begin as theological liberalism, and end in a fiasco, with a "new authority just as external as the old, and submission to it just as slavish." This same error is reflected in those who declare that the classical Protestant view of authority is medieval; it might be more accurate to say that it is distinctively Christian, and that newer views are out of the Christian stream.

III
rationalists had difficulty in seeing the inconsistency of their principles with those of orthodoxy. At first the rationalists majored upon the elaboration of the principles of 'natural religion' and sought to show how these harmonized with the truths of revealed religion. They were willing to allow that revealed religion was essential to supply what natural religion lacked. Its break with orthodoxy came by route of its insistence that revealed religion must accord with reason in the sense that it must rest upon positive grounds, easily apparent to the rational powers. Christianity was made to show its credentials to the reason, which came to possess not only the power to test revelation but also ability to discover by itself the necessary principles of religion. Accordingly, authority was sought in truths which were apparent to all right-minded men.

Rationalism had no difficulty in accepting the view that the basic premises of religion and morality were universal in man; from this very universality came their infallible validity and absolute authority. Acceptance of this view shortly led to a thinning out of the concept of revelation and later to the elimination of the necessity for salvation. Religion had no other task than that of promoting morality through affording it a supposed support in authority—this authority issuing from the relationship of God to man as Creator-to-creature. The net result of this was a decreasing emphasis upon the Bible as authoritative and an increasing emphasis upon religion as a mere support to natural morality. John Toland thus declared that Christianity contains no mystery, while Matthew Tyndal charmed his readers with the statement that the Gospels merely republish the religion of nature. In general, rationalism, in both its intellectual and its ethical aspects, has been hostile to authority in the Biblical sense of the term; by 1750, reason had largely been deprived of its rôle as helper to religious faith and had become rather a rival to revelation.

The reaction to Rationalism came partly as a result of the coldly logical and utilitarian character of its 'religion.' The outstanding figure in the Romantic revolt against Rationalism was Schleiermacher, who as one educated in the pietistic tradition found the thought of the eighteenth century too dry and shallow. In place of Rationalism, he proposed a re-definition of religion, not in terms of a given way of knowing, nor yet in a given way of doing, but in terms of the inner life of feeling. To him the essence of religion lay in man's sense of absolute dependence. It is outside the province of this paper to describe in detail the newer psychological interpretation of religion, traceable to Schleiermacher and elaborated by the Romanticists. What needs to be considered here is the manner in which this movement dealt with the question of authority. While earlier writers had appealed to religious experience as a justification of traditional theology, Schleiermacher made Christian experience a measure by which doctrines were tested for truth or falsity. Religion thus became entirely subjective, distinguished from knowledge on the one hand, and independent from morality on the other. The Bible is thus considered to be merely the fruit of the religious consciousness—an expression of religion rather than the authoritative revelation of God's will to man.

In this view, religion has its locus in the religious experience; in this 'experience' man feels his oneness with God, and from this experience of oneness springs religious authority. Man thus needs no appeal to the Scriptures, nor to historic creeds; his own religious consciousness is the final court of appeal. To this individual experience and its yield of 'authority' may be added the pooled experiences of all
religious men, Christian and non-Christian. Mr. A. J. Balfour has carried this latter aspect of Schleiermacher’s theology to an interesting extreme, in which he declares that all our religious beliefs are social products, and that authority is to be specifically contrasted with reason. '

To Schleiermacher and the others of the Religious Psychology school, there are no authoritative sources for Christianity; the Bible is simply the record of the experiences of religious geniuses, especially of Jesus Christ, in whom the consciousness of God was more clear than in most men, and by whom was mediated to us the best example of the religious consciousness. Authority thus becomes internal, with its roots in life, not in the Bible. Prophecy and miracle become unimportant because second-hand. Such authority is private, limited, and valid only for self; it admits of degrees, and may change as the individual grows older. It is not surprising that this relativistic view of authority took fire in a century which was dominated in its thought-patterns by the doctrine of evolution.

The variants of the emphasis upon “religious consciousness” as a source of authority have been many. There is not space here for a discussion of the ‘value judgment’ theory of Albrecht Ritschl, or of Harald Höfding’s quest for a seat of authority in personality alive to a sense of value and convinced of the basic tendency of the universe toward ‘conservation of value.”

The so-called liberal movement in theology pursued in large measure the course set by the Romantic movement, until by the third decade of our century the modern mind no longer found itself challenged by any kind of authority save that issuing from private preference and dictated by private utility. The world-view of the multitudes of men become so largely this-worldly that ultimate issues in human life and thought were lost sight of. Meanwhile, as the old world lay dying, and as forces menacing our entire world-order gathered energy for an explosion, liberal theologians beamed with optimism at the point of the innate goodness of man, and denounced as superfluous the contention of the orthodox that man needs a source of authority outside and from above himself.

In the interval between the two great wars, some Europeans, chiefly Swiss, saw the menacing clouds of totalitarianism gathering in a distant sky. Men like Herman Kutter and Karl Barth, perceiving that men must have some form of transcendental authority as their only guarantee against the rise of the most vicious and degrading type of human authority, sought to re-establish the authority of the Bible in the consciousness of their hearers. Unfortunately these men, and those who were subsequently added to their ranks (the most notable of whom was Emil Brunner), were unable to rid themselves of the negative tradition with respect to the Bible in which they had been schooled. The system of theology variously called Barthianism, The Crisis Theology, The Dialectical Theology, or Neo-Orthodoxy, seems inconsistent in its attempt to insist that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, while yet adhering to the principal features of liberal biblical criticism, which is in turn under the sway of the principle of continuity, the chief target of the dialectical theologians.

It is difficult to know what men like Barth and Brunner mean by the ‘authority’ of the Bible, or to know what their American partner, Reinhold Niebuhr, means to substitute for the ‘autonomous man.’ The former of these, at least, seem to be trying to say that in reading the Bible, we hear God speaking to us, not in the orthodox

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1 Balfour, A. J. ibid., pp. 219f.
2 Höfding, Harald, Philosophy of Religion, pp. 275ff.
sense of speaking in the language of the Bible, but through our consciousness, as we are brought face-to-face with God in reading those episodes in which others were similarly confronted with Him and by Him.

From the foregoing remarks, the reader will gather that the dialectical theologians are unclear at the point of whether we or are not the co-architects of religious authority. Further, it is far from clear that these men have eliminated from theology the very subjectivism against which they inveigh. Again, in their attitude toward higher criticism, they give the impression of joining the foes of orthodoxy in their insistence that Bible-believing Christians are advocates of ignorance and obscurantism.

Much that has been said thus far has been in the vein of criticism of modern trends. Justification for this course may be found in the fact that viewpoints are frequently best understood in the light of their opposites. Enough has been said to indicate that the quest for an extra-biblical seat of authority, in reason or in experience, has usually ended in a chaos of confusion, in which private utility became the final arbiter for morals, and Christian doctrine evaporated. In place of theology has come an extolling of humanity and an exhibition of its supposed glory.

IV

It is now time to turn with good heart to the consideration of the authority of the Christian Scriptures. The question of authority is closely related to the questions of revelation and inspiration. The claims of Christianity to be regarded as a divinely revealed system of authoritative truth must be considered in the light of the fact that Christianity has not made all men of one mind concerning God, redemption and human destiny: it has not put an end to all questioning at these points. Its classic claim, that “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” has not been universally allowed. There has been historically no infallible intuition, nor no necessary conclusion of reason, that this pronouncement is true. Yet multitudes have been so persuaded, and have found in the Christian Scriptures that which to them stamps those Scriptures as a definitive revelation from God.

It needs to be said that God might have given to men a universal, inescapable, and immediate vision of Himself. Doubtless such a direct revelation would have been impressive. However, the Almighty seems rather to have seen fit to allow room for faith, with its correlative hazards. Nor is the presence of an authoritative revelation dissonant with human freedom. Rather it seems compatible with all we know of man that God should present to man in concrete form all that is highest in character and in action in His Son, who is God’s final voice to man, and who is the expression of the One in whom authority resides.

This prompts the observation that the Scriptures have been held by thoughtful and able scholars to be authoritative as mediating the mind of God to men. According to this view, they possess authority as making God known, and as testifying to His only Son, the Lord of the Church. Thus, the Bible is held to bring to each generation Him who is absolute Truth and Life.

But upon what grounds may we hold the Bible to be a final authority? The early Protestants emphasized the necessity for an inward testimony of the Holy Spirit to the validity and

consequent authority of the Scriptures. This leaves a great deal to private judgment, and in practice has great limitations. It does do justice to the fact that there is a difference between the Christian and the non-Christian mind. It does not clearly differentiate between the normal processes in the Christian's mind on the one hand, and the work of the Divine Spirit on the other. More important still, it does not help us at the point most needing help, namely that of deciding upon those critical questions of (e.g.) canonicity and authorship, and of variant textual readings.

The most that can be established by this subjective testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Christian mind is that the Bible has (1) a peculiar inward vitality, (2) a power to convince him that it is God speaking, and (3) the marks of a supernatural character in its production and content that clears that mind from any reasonable doubt that the Scriptures are an authoritative message to man.

The method of objective establishment of the claim of the Bible to authority has held a charm for apologists. The character of the apostles, their nearness to Jesus Christ, His promise to inspire them through the Holy Spirit — these and other features are compelling to the Christian mind. They have, however, not been equally powerful in convincing those outside Christianity; nor can they answer the vexed critical questions just mentioned. Nor can either this objective approach, or the subjective mode (that of the Spirit's inward testimony) afford us a final word when applied collectively. There is no way of securing an infallible and statistical average for the opinion of the Christian community.

Since great sectors of Christians have erred at important points in this matter, how shall we decide upon the question of the authoritative character of the Bible? Perhaps the best we can do is to state certain canons or general principles to serve as guideposts in our attempt to discover the truth. Here we set forth six such canons, together with such elaboration as seems essential to their comprehension.

1. Historically, Christianity existed before the New Testament was written. Hence the Church produced the New Testament, and not vice versa. Christianity was revealed in Jesus Christ, and the Scriptures derive their authority from Him.

2. As previously emphasized, the Bible means one thing to the Christian mind, but may appear as quite another to the person with an abnormal Christian outlook, or no Christian outlook at all. We may state as an axiom, that if the Bible is authoritative, then no healthy Christian mind can develop truth which will contradict it.

3. Closely related to this is the principle, that the Christian mind will seek to sympathetically read the Scriptures, not with a predisposition to seek for errors and contradictions. In other words, the harmonistic frame of mind is essentially Christian. (It goes without saying that modern thought has little sympathy with harmonistic interpretations of Scripture, preferring cold analysis to reverent synthesis.)

4. The Bible does not attempt to treat its themes in a scientific style. It is illustrative, historical, often indirect, and in a proper sense progressive. It deals with principles which frequently transcend human reason; it specializes in appeal to the heart and the conscience, and is not particularly directed toward the analytical reason.

5. The Scriptures are a Paideia for the human race; they contain a "first covenant" which was not faulty, so that a "second" was needed. (Hebrews 8:7) Some aspects of the Old Testament were as really temporary as they were (by our Lord's express affirmation)
valid for their time by reason of being directly a revelation from God. Thus, the perfection of the Scriptures must be viewed in the light of their adaptation to accomplish that for which they were designed, namely to build in the Hebrew people a fixed center of conviction, and a readiness to receive the Son from heaven. However, the revelation was given to men possessing incomplete power of comprehension, and needed (and received) supplementation in the fulness of time.

6. It is in no sense inconsistent with God's holiness and intrinsic immutability that He should thus accommodate Himself to human weakness. The Bible is in no way depreciated by such accommodation, nor is its authority brought into necessary question. It ought to be sufficient for us if any given part thereof was as nearly perfect as circumstances allowed. After all, God had to begin somewhere with fallen man!

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The writer in no sense imagines that he has even suggested all that may be said at the point of the authority of the Christian Scriptures. He is aware that the six canons just stated will have little or no weight with the mind outside Christianity. He is aware, further, that objectors may find what seem to be discrepancies and contradictions in Holy Writ. He is too well informed to believe that he can answer most, or even many, of such objections.

What can be said is, that here in the Bible we have a library of sixty-six books in one binding, of literature without peer in the literatures of men. Here is a Book unique in its power to probe man's deepest needs, to lay bare his deepest subterfuges, and to point to One capable of meeting his deepest wants. It professes to tell whence he came, and offers to give him light upon whither he goes.

These same Scriptures lead to a type of Christian experience— or, if you choose, to a type of relationship with God—which not only satisfies the soul's deepest cravings, but which also makes these very Scriptures to present the most profound challenge to the mind. It would, after all, be no compliment to the profound mind of God, if its Revelation gave the finite mind no reason to grapple with its truths, or afforded it no zest for the pursuit of its deeper ranges of meaning.

This Bible, however, is not exclusively a stimulant for the mind: it is primarily a binding authority—a divine regula—upon the whole of life. As such it affords a certitude at the point of life's most urgent problems. But beyond that, it lays upon man those obligations to repent, to believe, to obey, to walk humbly before God—which in turn issue in that profound paradox, the liberty of the Christian man, who is at the same time

Most free lord of all, and
Most bound servant of all.