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# Thirty Years Later:

## a retrospective on the significance of H. E. W. Turner's *The Pattern of Christian Truth*

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It is now thirty years ago since the noted Anglican scholar H. E. W. Turner published his Bampton lectures, *The Pattern of Christian Truth*.[1] Our horizons have changed considerably in those thirty years, and there have been many new and challenging developments in Christian thought. This is especially true with regard to the complex question of how to delineate the lines of continuity between contemporary Christianity and its origins. Yet although our under-standing of the issues may now be more fundamental, and our explorations of these issues challenging and rigorous, Turner's contribution has been largely overlooked. This is, I believe, a sad oversight, as what Turner says about the orthodoxy/heresy question in earliest Christianity has much relevance to the modern discussion.

There are, it will be recalled, two major figures in the debate over orthodoxy and heresy in earliest Christianity: H. E. W. Turner and Walter Bauer. Let me attempt to show the importance of Turner's thought for us today by first describing his debate with Bauer.

The classical view of the pattern of early Christian development runs unbelief, right belief, deviations into wrong belief. First, unbelievers were converted into orthodox Christian believers, and only later were there deviations from the norm with the rise of heresies. The pure Christian doctrine was revealed by Christ to his apostles, who were commissioned to take this unadulterated gospel to the portions of the world allotted to them. It was only after the death of the apostles that heresy crept into the church.

It was this schematization of the development of early Christianity which Walter Bauer criticized in his book, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.[2] In brief, Bauer's thesis had a three-pronged thrust. First, the terms 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' are a retrojection of schematic categories inapplicable to an early Christianity of consider-able confusion and fluidity. Second, groups later labelled 'heretical' were, in fact, the earliest representatives of Christianity in many areas. Finally, the victory of what is now labelled 'orthodox' was due almost entirely to the Roman Church.

Bauer's starting-point was the doctrinal commitments of the party that emerged dominant in Christianity by the end of the third

century. The commitments were specific articles of faith. The claim was that these articles had defined Christian faith from the beginning. Taking 'orthodoxy' to signify the commitments, Bauer set out to put the claim to the test of history—and found it wanting.

What Bauer failed to do, of course, was to settle on a heuristic definition of orthodoxy: that is, he did not offer a formal definition which, as an invariant structure, could take account of development. He therefore lacked the conceptual tools to deal with orthodoxy as a development incorporating the past, accommodating to the present, and anticipating the future.

In his reply to Bauer, Turner suggested that:

> The development of early Christian theology as a whole (and not merely in the Patristic period) may be perhaps better interpreted as the interaction of fixed and flexible elements, both of which are equally necessary for the determination of Christian truth in the setting of a particular age.[3]

What are the 'fixed elements' in the Christian tradition? First, there are the 'religious facts themselves, without which there would be no grounds for its existence.'[4] This is a fundamental point for Turner—'the Church's grasp on the religious facts was prior to any attempt to work them into a coherent whole.'[5] He gives the name *lex orandi* to the notion of 'the relatively full and fixed experimental grasp of what was involved in being a Christian.'[6] Thus, for instance, Turner maintains that Christians lived trinitarily long before the evolution of Nicene orthodoxy.

Further elements of fixity lay in the biblical revelation, the creeds, and the rule of faith. The 'flexible elements' are the methods and conclusions of individual theologians, the great traditions and the theological framework in which the philosophical explanation took place.

Turner's main contention is that the situation described by Bauer is more adequately explained by the existence of a 'penumbra' or fringe between orthodoxy and heresy; the line of division was not nearly as sharp as Bauer avers. Bauer's treatment is vitiated by his failure to attain to an adequate view of orthodoxy: he does not allow for its richness and variety. In short:

> Orthodoxy resembles not so much a stream as a sea, not a single melodic theme but a rich and varied harmony, not a single closed system but a rich manifold of thought and life.[7]

Like Bauer, Turner has concerned himself with the doctrinal content of orthodoxy and heresy. But he has done so in a somewhat different way. He has argued that an examination of the self-understanding of post-apostolic Christianity revealed a healthy

interaction between fixed and flexible elements. Only by grasping this point does the unity and diversity of early Christianity become intelligible. Moreover, if we take account of the mentality of the earliest church, we cannot but come upon the phenomenon Turner calls the *lex orandi*: that is, the consciousness of standing in a faith relationship, a response to divine revelation consisting essentially in thanksgiving for the boon of salvation. We infer from the performance (*Vollzug*) of Christian faith that it is at once an exigence for, and a source of, theology.

> Thus the Biblical data are mediated through the medium of the *lex orandi* of the Church. All the major doctrines of orthodoxy were lived devotionally as part of the corporate experience of the Church before their theological developments became a matter of urgent necessity.[8]

Turner's major concern was to try to capture that which animated, sustained, and nourished the early church. From whence did it understand itself to derive its animating power? The answer to this question is surely the key to understanding the life and development of Christianity, and it was in addressing this question that Turner formulated his notion of *lex orandi*. The faith response is the response to the givenness of God. It is only within this context that one can begin to make sense of Christian development.

In our technological society, which is so prepossessed with abstract and formal thinking, this kind of approach is quite foreign. Moreover, within the Christian tradition, the stress on preaching, hearing, and understanding, so characteristic of Protestantism, has placed undue stress on what goes on in the mind. It has often been remarked, for instance, that the Old Testament contains very little actual 'doctrine'. As Eichrodt observes:

> Nowhere are formal 'instructions' about the Being of God or his attributes delivered to the Israelite. His knowledge of God comes to him from the realities of his own life. He learns about the nature of God by reasoning *a posteriori* from the standards and usages of Law and Cult, which rule his personal life with divine authority, from the events of history and their interpretation by his spiritual leaders, in short, from his daily experience of the rule of God. By this means he comprehends the divine essence much more accurately than he would from any number of abstract concepts. The result is that the formation of such concepts in the OT lags far behind, while the same spiritual values which they are normally the means of conveying to us are yet uncompromisingly real and effective.[9]

Theology is not an abstract intellectual 'game'—it arises out of the need to articulate prior religious commitment. Prayer in response to the boon of salvation is what John Macquarrie calls 'thankful

thinking'. Theology arises out of the whole life of faith; it cannot be isolated from it. 'Theology itself, as the intellectual clarification and interpretation of faith, cannot be isolated from the whole life of faith. Theology makes sense only in the context of worship and action.'[10]

As Macquarrie further points out, the knowledge of God cannot be described as either objective or subjective, because our knowledge of God is not like knowledge of things, nor is it like what we know of ourselves:

> We know God only because he lets himself be known, and therefore our knowledge of him is not the mastering, objectifying knowledge that is characteristic of natural sciences, but is a knowledge suffused with reverence and gratitude. The knowledge of God is inseparable from the adoration of God.[11]

A genuine theology, then, is shaped by a knowledge of God in prayer and worship.

The Christian of the first few centuries was quite obviously in a situation different from that of today. The undifferentiated consciousness of the Christian of the early centuries makes a comparison between him and us very difficult. But the Christian of today, by virtue of the fact that he is a Christian, must stand in some kind of continuity with his fellow Christian of the first few centuries. The problem is how to delineate the lines of that continuity. This was essentially the question that Bauer and Turner were addressing. Admittedly, they were not speaking of the continuity between the Christian of the first centuries and ourselves: rather, they were examining whether there was continuity between the Christian of the fourth and the Christian of the second century. Yet the problematic is the same, and I believe Turner's approach is very instructive for us.

In the first place, Turner maintains that the attempt to articulate normative self-definition arose out of the *lex orandi*. This approach to problems is what distinguishes the Christian community—as a religious community—from a secular one. This whole style of thought is different from the Greek philosophical approach to problems. It is also different from the modern pragmatic approach. Moreover, Turner's view that the development of Christianity is best described as the interaction between fixed and flexible elements is a suggestive line of thought. Given that Christianity has expressed itself differently in different cultures and times, there have always been elements of fixity within the Christian tradition. What are some of these elements of fixity? To quote Turner:

> Belief in God as a Sovereign Father of a creation which is his handiwork forms an essential part of the basic realities of the Christian Church. His being may at times be described in terms more appropriate to the static and transcendent Absolute of Greek

metaphysics, His fatherhood too closely approximated to mere causation, His Providence defined in terms drawn from the Hellenic concept of Pronoia. The religious fact still underlies the changing categories under which it is expressed. [Moreover], the fact of Christ as the Historical Redeemer serves to differentiate even the most metaphysical of Christian thinkers from the Greek 'flight from history'.[12]

The Christian might well ask himself at this point whether these fundamental realities—God as sovereign of creation, with a salvific plan for mankind—are compatible with the ideas which permeate much of contemporary Christian thinking.

Turner's account of early Christianity is more convincing because he has taken account of *development*. Essentially, Turner points to the fact that it was in the tradition of the church that the process of transposition was vitally realized before the historical consciousness brought this to light in a reflectively intentional fashion. If we do not take account of development, then, like Bauer, we will see all history—and not just Christian history—as essentially discontinuous. By arguing for a *dynamic unity* of Christian development, Turner argues for what Bernard Lonergan calls 'the unity of a subject in process'. It is the interaction of the fixed and flexible elements which gives rise to development. To abandon the fixed elements is to neglect origins and make way for 'enthusiasm' and the fanciful. To abandon the flexible elements is to not take the continuity of history seriously, and an anachronistic 'classicism' holds the field. It is perhaps in this light that we should look at thinkers such as George P. Grant and C. S. Lewis, who hold to what I have just called an 'anachronisitic classicism'. Grant, for example, settles on the elements of the classical Greek view of natural law.[13] He compares these to the view of nature and freedom found in the modern world. He finds them to be incompatible and concludes that there has been a calamitous fracture in the western tradition. Leaving aside the question of whether this is an expedient approach for a Christian to take, we see that Grant has taken a line of approach remarkably similar to that of Bauer. Someone like Macquarrie, on the other hand, defines natural law as a 'constant tendency' or an 'inbuilt directedness'. In defining natural law in this way, Macquarrie—like Turner—does take account of development. He is thus able—unlike Grant—to accommodate natural law to the modern world. Thus, he says:

> Natural law is, as it were, the pointer within us that orients us to the goal of human existence. Actual rules, laws, and prohibitions are judged by this 'unwritten law' in accordance with whether they promote or impede the movement toward fuller existence. Natural law changes, in the sense that the precepts we may derive from it change as

human nature itself changes, and also in the sense that man's self-understanding changes as he sharpens his image of mature manhood. But through the changes there remains the constancy of direction.[14]

To conclude: One way of examining the question of continuity in Christianity is to schematize the 'distinctively Christian'. This is essentially what Turner does. In reflecting upon the debate on orthodoxy and heresy in earliest Christianity, we see that no attempt to specify the 'distinctively Christian' will be adequate unless it takes account of development. This development, maintains Turner, evolves from the *lex orandi* and derives its dynamic unity from the interaction between fixed and flexible elements. This is surely a most useful insight which deserves greater consideration than it has so far received.

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## NOTES

1 H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (Mowbray, London 1954).
2 R. A. Kraft and G. Krodel, eds (Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1971). The original German version was *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Mohr/Siebeck, Tübingen 1934). A second edition, edited by Georg Strecker with the addition of two appendices, was published in 1963.
3 Turner, op. cit., p.26.
4 loc. cit.
5 ibid., p.27.
6 ibid., p.28.
7 ibid., p.80.
8 ibid., p.474.
9 Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol.I, (SCM Press, London 1961), pp.32f.
10 John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality* (Harper and Row, New York 1972), p.11.
11 ibid., p.54.
12 Turner, op. cit., p.36.
13 *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (Copp Clark, Toronto 1955, 1966²). See also his *Technology and Empire* (House of Anansi, Toronto 1969); *Time as History* (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 1969); *English-Speaking Justice* (Mount Allison University, Sackville 1974).
14 John Macquarrie, *Three Issues in Ethics* (Harper and Row, New York 1970), p.108.