The Authority of the Canon

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MY appointed task is to address the topic of this paper from the point of view of the philosophy of religion. We all know that this science has fallen upon bad times over the past decades. But a few years ago it changed its name to Philosophical Theology, accepted Paul Tillich as chief spokesman, and now happily pursues linguistic analysis, asks existential questions, and perhaps—at night and in private—reads a little of Karl Barth.

In view of this situation, how is the philosopher of religion (or the philosophical theologian) to aproach the subject of the authority of the canon? I propose to begin with Kierkegaard's idea of revelation and apostolicity, then to relate this to the problem of canonicity and tradition, and finally to show the inadequacy of Barth's christological analogy and the need for a reformulated doctrine of inspiration. If it is somewhat ominous to begin with Kierkegaard and end with Barth, to attempt all this in one paper is a kind of lunacy. On both counts I crave your indulgence.

1. The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle

Adolph Peter Adler, Magister Artium, Lutheran priest in Denmark, and author of four books in the Hegelian vogue, experienced in 1842 a "vision of light" in which Jesus bade him burn his books, and dictated the substance of a new one. Adler was deposed after an enquiry in which he admitted that "revelation was perhaps too strong an expression" for his experience. Adler's contemporary, Soren Kierkegaard, rejoiced at first that perhaps now Christendom had what it required, someone to claim divine authority in such a way as to scandalize it into a Socratic confession of its ignorance of Christian truth. But Adler lacked sufficient naïveté to maintain the ironic situation. Therefore Kierkegaard writes:

> We will stop here and look carefully before us, for it seems clear enough that the upshot of Adler's whole story is that he is a genius. *Quel bruit pour une omelette*! All honour to genius. In case Adler is a genius, in God's name! I certainly shall not envy him for that. But he began by having had a revelation—though *summa summarum* by this we are to understand that he is a genius [*On Authority and Revelation*, p. 102].

Kierkegaard's thesis is that between an apostle and a genius there is a qualitative distinction, the decisive factor being the divine authority. The genius is born, the apostle is made. The genius develops from his potential possibility, while the apostle's existence is contingent upon the historical actuality of the divine revelation which constitutes him such. Kierkegaard

goes on to satirize that "clerical ignorance" which prostitutes Christianity by eulogizing, for instance, the genius of St. Paul—his style and artistic use of language. Why not rather "maintain that his work as an upholsterer must have been so perfect that no upholsterer either before or since has been able to equal it?"

The episode of Adler and Kierkegaard points up in a striking manner the basic problem of our philosophy of revelation: that the historicity of Christian truth involves a unique, contingent and unrepeatable factor which offended, most notably, the philosopher Lessing. He claimed that "accidental truths of history can never establish necessary truths of reason," and refused "to dream of suspending nothing less than all eternity by a spider's thread," meaning the words of the witnesses of Christianity's first period. Now we cannot avoid offending Lessing and his friends. Although Christianity learns much from her men of genius, she is not built upon their teaching, upon the fruits of genius. Her one foundation is an Apostle sent from God, namely Jesus Christ (Heb. 3:1); and with Him in this foundational apostolate are those whom He in turn has sent (Eph. 2:20).

Theological students are taught that an apostle is "one sent with a commission." But the decisive character of apostolicity is its relation to the Incarnation, indeed to the forty days between Christ's Resurrection and Ascension. Just as Christ was sent into the world at a certain time and place—so that Caesar Augustus and Pontius Pilate became involved in the event—even so are the apostles called and sent because of this space-time phenomenon, this historical figure. Revelation as incarnation of the Word means a distinction of times: the time of Christ, the time of the apostolate, the time of the Church that received its canon, and the continuing time of Church proclamation.

This radical nature of apostolicity is best illustrated by the thorny problem of St. Paul's conversion. We must begin from a text like Mark 3:14, "and he appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach." After the Ascension, Peter set forth the criteria of apostolicity quite explicitly: "So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection" (Acts 1:21f). Justus and Matthias fulfilled the criteria, and the lot was cast between them. Since this was after the Ascension, after the event which sealed the resurrection with its veil of a hidden dimension, with its infinite recession into the being of the Godhead, therefore the criteria could apply only retroactively, to a limited (and diminishing) number of men.

On the Damascus Road, Saul the Pharisee claims to have received the commissioning of an apostle. His claim has nothing to do with religious genius, but with the fact that the nature of his vision united him with the apostolate, presented him, in an unique yet valid sense, with the criteria of the witnesses to the Resurrection. Thus he describes himself as one born too

late for normal apostolic vision, but nevertheless, like an abortion unnaturally alive, to be added to the list of witnesses: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me" (I Cor. 15:8). In effect, this is a pre-Ascension kind of vision: "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (I Cor. 9:1).

It is this meaning of apostolicity that the religious philosopher misses in much of today's research. To take an illustrious example, C. H. Dodd finds the authority of the Bible in "the authority of experts in the knowledge of God, masters in the art of living; the authority of religious genius," and describes Jesus as one "in whom religious genius reached its highest point and passed into something greater still" (*The Authority of the Bible*, pp. 24, 27). Dodd's basis is the primary authority of truth itself, and he sees clearly that the real problem is the way God conveys His truth to men. Yet his concept of "genius" compromises the constitutive orientation of the apostolate, and surely of Christ himself. The canon was closed because the relation of the New Testament authors to the apostolic witness was thought to form a closed circle, like the relation of the apostles themselves to Christ. Paul could be referred backwards in this circle, but not forwards into the category of religious genius. The latter would have meant an extension *ad infinitum*, so that a Theresa in the sixteenth century or an Adler in the nineteenth might be considered equally authoritative.

2. The Canon and Tradition

The formal criteria of canonicity have proved complex in the history of the Church, and have combined with the working of some internal criterion as well. The Old Testament canon was not closed finally until early in the Christian era. The rabbinic tradition of the post-exilic community demanded that a prophetic book be written in Hebrew and before the time of Nehemiah. Yet *Ecclesiasticus* fulfils both tests and was not accepted. The New Testament case is similar. About twenty books were universally recognized by the second century Church as a basic canon. The two chief marks appear to have been apostolic origin and general usage—with Marcion as a negative test! The *Shepherd* of Hermas, although referred to by Irenaeus as "Scripture," was rejected at Rome because Hermas wrote "quite recently, in our own times." The famous listing of Eusebius in the fourth century indicates seven disputed books, if we include Hebrews and Revelation, which were accepted in certain parts of the Church. The five generally disputed were James, II Peter, II and III John, Jude.

The term *canon*, meaning staff, rule, pattern, originally signified the whole rule of faith, the apostolic doctrine. When the fourth century Church applied the term to its official list of writings, was it making a particular application of a general principle, or perhaps narrowing the meaning of the term? This is the question at the heart of our contemporary problem of Tradition. I submit in answer, however, that the Church from the second to the fourth centuries was a Church in reaction, being forced to define and

to declare its authoritative rule of faith and life, and that it was able at last to say that its canon was a written, finalized, prophetic-apostolic word.

In equating its canon with Scripture, with a group of writings, the Church was acknowledging a certain independence or autonomy, a "freedom towards her and power over her," of this canon. Thus the Church cannot be said properly to "create" her canon, but rather to recognize and declare the nature and bounds of the rule created and given by her Lord. The closing of the canon corresponded to the closed circle of historical revelation on which her existence depended.

Yet the closing of the canon was a "Church" event, and therefore not simply ultimate or divine. The formal and material criteria remain operative, so that each generation must accept the canon by its own decision of faith. This truth was illustrated in the sixteenth century, when the canon was modified in two ways. In the first place, the problematic Apocrypha were declared to be uncanonical in the proper and therefore authoritative sense, by the Reformed party at least. Secondly, the seven New Testament books which had been suspect in the Early Church (the *antilegomena*) were once again questioned—by Luther, Calvin, Brenz, not to mention Erasmus and even Cardinal Cajetan!

Luther's stress falls on the content of Scripture: it preaches or treats of Christ; that is its office, and so its test (*was Christum treibet*). He calls the Bible "in truth the spiritual body of Christ," and Christ the "mathematical point of holy scripture." He makes an interesting distinction between the Old Testament as Scripture proper because of its written form, and the New Testament as properly a preached Gospel. His radical emphasis on the criterion of the preaching of Christ led him to write, in the familiar passage from the *Preface* to James and Jude:

> All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach Christ and deal with him. That is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether they deal with Christ or not, since all the Scriptures show us Christ, and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ. What does not teach Christ is not apostolic even though St. Peter or St. Paul taught it; again, what preaches Christ would be apostolic even though Judas, Annas, Pilate and Herod did it.

Thus he can state that "John's Gospel and St. Paul's Epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's First Epistle, are the true kernel and marrow of all books." As early as his September Bible of 1522 he had separated the books of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation in the table of contents, thus preparing for Lutheranism's distinction between a proto- and deutero-canon. The book of James, that "right strawy epistle," is on occasion called "a good book," but Luther also declared, "One of these days I'll use James to light the fire!"

With John Calvin we take a careful step forward, which will have mixed effects in later years. Calvin suggests one valid "proof" for the authority of the canon, the justly famous *testimonium internum spiritus sancti*—not originated, but best articulated by him.

Let it be considered, then, as an undeniable truth, that they who have been inwardly taught by the Spirit, feel an entire acquiescence in the Scripture, and that it is self-authenticated, carrying with it its own evidence; it ought not to be made the subject of demonstration and arguments from reason; but it obtains the credit which it deserves with us by the testimony of the Spirit [*Inst.* 1.7.5].

But in the next chapter he proceeds to give "arguments from reason" as a kind of secondary "proof" to those experiencing the Spirit's prior witness. Calvin's methodology here presents a like problem to that of his doctrine of predestination. Unfortunately, historic Calvinism has managed to place the emphasis in both doctrines on the secondary rationalizing rather than Calvin's primary grappling with the mystery of the Spirit's office.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, however, is faithful to Calvin on this point. After indicating those qualities of Scripture "whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God," the Confession concludes, "Yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our heart" (1.5). Thus Scripture is instrumental in the first place, object of the Spirit's witness only in a secondary and derivative way.

Perhaps these notes from Luther and Calvin illustrate their conviction that the authority of the canon partakes of an absolute character. For them, this is not a question of a primary source of authority within a relative context of complementary strands of tradition—such as the shape of the liturgy as Dom Gregory Dix outlined it, or the rule of truth or faith as Tertullian and Irenaeus use the terms. And even if the Reformers, like Athanasius before them, argued for certain foundation doctrines as contained in Scripture only indirectly or implicitly (an argument *de re ipsa* but not *de vocabulo*), this was not felt to question the "sufficient authority" of Scripture in the Church. It was their consistent and insistent enunciation of this principle that led to the erection of a counter-Church beginning with the Tridentine decrees. For it was the Council of Trent which built a new structure on largely unformed ideas. It brought the old Vincentian Rule up to date: now there were to be two explicitly marked channels by which revelation is transmitted, Scripture and tradition, each to be heard *pari pietatis affectu.*

When one considers the unfortunate direction of post-Tridentine Romanism, and the new form of the question it poses, the debate about Tradition carried on between Anglicans and those they call "Protestants" seems decidedly *demitasse.* I refer to the concept of the development of doctrine, by which Tradition no longer merely draws out what is implicit in Scripture and oral apostolic doctrine (the old idea of "logical explication"), but now is an instrument for the progression and production of new doctrine. This has led Karl Adam to contrast the "dead word" of Scripture with the "living voice" of the Church.

The Tübingen school's Johann A. Möhler seems to be the key figure in this story. His relation to John Henry Newman has been treated most

recently by Owen Chadwick in his book *From Bossuet to Newman.* From this line of ancestry came M. J. Scheeben, most influential at the time when Pius IX declared that the Pope, speaking *ex cathedra,* possesses the infallibility which Christ wished the doctrinal definitions of faith and life to possess in his Church. The classical concept of tradition as the unwritten apostolic testimony and the process of its Church transmission was now left behind. There was to be a third source of revelation, the creative, vital authority of the Church of Rome, as gathered up in one head, even in its *papa.* For the same Vatican decree of 1870 states that the papal words, by themselves and not by the consent of the Church, are *irreformable*—he who contradicts them, *anathema sit.*

It seems to me that this movement above all others presses us for an answer to the problem of Scripture and Tradition, and in particular to the authority of the Canon, in terms of a new doctrine of inspiration.

3. Christology and the Doctrine of Inspiration

The unhappy history of the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture in the post-Reformation Church is familiar to all. Where Luther and Calvin talked of the preaching of Christ and the witness of the Spirit, Protestant Orthodoxy talked of dictation and inerrancy. The ground of authority was shifted so that the doctrine of Scripture became related directly to theories of inspiration rather than of revelation. Thus the Lutheran Calov could state, "The form of divine revelation is inspiration (*theopneustia*), through which divine revelation is what it is."

A complication emerged in the nineteenth century when the influence of ideas of exact science contributed towards a theory of literalism based on a materialistic notion of truth. It is this phenomenon that has led writers like Gabriel Hebert and J. K. S. Reid to describe the doctrine of verbal infallibility as peculiarly modern, and not simply a continuation of the doctrine of inspiration held by Protestant Orthodoxy.

The shift to a pseudo-scientific ground proved fatal. For a new but less *pseudo* science of Biblical Criticism was already surveying the ground and beginning to excavate here and there. It led to a complete undermining of the new edifice of an infallible book. It was after the collapse of this edifice, when Kantian moralism seemed the only recourse for theologians in both Europe and America, that an address was delivered in Switzerland entitled "The Strange New World Within the Bible." A young Swiss pastor examined the kind of speech found in holy Scripture and concluded, "It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men . . . The word of God is within the Bible." That was 1916; and the speaker was, of course, Karl Barth.

It was not yet the theology of crisis in its classic lines, where the Biblical authority derived from the "transparency" of the intervening centuries

between the men of Scripture and ourselves. But our concern is with a more mature Barth, who emerged from the "egg-shells" of crisis theology by publishing his crucial book on Anselm in 1931. And we are especially concerned with his Prolegomena to the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*—prolegomena which amount to 1444 pages of English print! This doctrine of the Word so carefully expounded by Barth represents the decisive step that modern theology has taken in rehabilitating the doctrine of Holy Scripture and its authority.

Let us attempt the madness of summing up Barth's doctrine in a few lines. He traces a threefold form of the Word: the eternal Word, the written Word of Scripture, and Church proclamation. But the decisive thread running through his analysis is the christological analogy so familiar now in all his theology: the divine-human nature of Jesus Christ is the God-given analogue for our understanding of revelation. Thus in Scripture there is an analogical correspondence to the person of Jesus Christ—according to the analogy of proper proportionality worked out in its logic by Aristotle and in its "theo-logic" by Thomas Aquinas. This involves a likeness and unlikeness of proportion on each side of the relationship. The Bible is not another hypostatic union, but resembles the divine-human unity of our Lord in that it also has two elements, a true divinity and a true humanity.

> When we necessarily allow for inherent differences, it is exactly the same with the unity of the divine and human word in Holy Scripture . . . As the Word of God in the sign of this prophetic-apostolic word of man Holy Scripture is like the unity of God and man in Jesus Christ. It is neither divine only nor human only. Nor is it a mixture of the two nor a *tertium quid* between them. But in its own way and degree it is very God and very man, i.e., a witness of revelation which itself belongs to revelation, and historically a very human literary document [*Church Dogmatics*, I.2, pp. 499, 501].

Since Lund we have been seeking to let our ecclesiology be informed by our christology. But is it not true also that since 1938 these words of Barth have been a summary of what we have been doing, consciously or not, in our doctrine of Scripture? We have been treating Scripture as both divine and human, for a Word of God along with words of men in one and the same book at one and the same time has seemed to be the answer. Let biblical criticism have free rein within the Bible, for it is word of man; let dogmatic theology have free rein with the Bible, for it is Word of God. This reconciliation has given a measure of peace to men of goodwill on both sides, for the Book now seems to be patient of the best that dogmatic theology can do with it as well as of the worst that biblical criticism can do to it!

I submit that the peace is too easy. It fails to honour the truth that we acknowledge in our use of Scripture—that we cannot and must not divorce Word of God from word of man, dogmatics from criticism. Else we breed a schizophrenic theology: exegetes buried under a mass of minutiae and dogmaticians floating above the results of modern criticism. The problem seems to be that on the christological analogy, the unity of the divine and

human elements now depends on the inspiration and genius of the exegete or interpreter! Yet it is not the principle of christological analogation that is wrong, but the manner of its application. What if Karl Barth had carried further his analogy, as he has worked it out in earlier sections (notably Section 15) and applied it so fruitfully in later ones, such as those on ethics and election? I refer to his emphasis on the true humanity of Jesus Christ as the *new* humanity, his appeal to the post-Chalcedon doctrines of *anhypostasia* and *enhypostasia*, for instance. This brings the stress on the positive, the enhypostatic nature of the new humanity, its definite and concrete existence within the assumption by the Word.

The miracle of the incarnation of the Word is such that the sovereign divine decision creates the possibility and actuality of a reactive free human decision, to render perfect obedience, to be the second Adam, the new man. Here is a humanity both true and new, both "fallible" and yet "perfect!" The two Patristic doctrines at issue here were formally adopted as dogmata by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553. In Christology they were meant to guard against the error of a double Christ, leading to docetism on the one hand and ebionitism on the other. As to Scripture, must we not follow these signs in order to prevent the corresponding error of a "double" Word, leading to docetic dogmatics and ebionitic exegesis?

Let us be careful. The "fundamentalist" doctrine of verbal inerrancy raises a christological question: what kind of human nature did the eternal Word assume? and answers it by saying, the flesh of Adam before the Fall, nay rather the flesh of a second Adam who could not fall—*non posse peccare*. The position is expressed in the well-known encyclical of Pope Pius XII: "Just as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, sin excepted, Heb. iv. 15, so the words of God, expressed in human language, became in all things like to human speech, error excepted" (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 1943).

We need not follow such identification (which is therefore no longer a proper proportionality!) in order to agree that some explanation in terms of "new human words" is in order, some doctrine of "inspiration." Is it not to be expected that the divine economy of a Word that completed Himself in a new humanity, an enhypostatic reality visible in His own Body, should involve as part of this Body a People named Israel? He raised up a holy nation and peculiar people, and led them to this graphic form of witness, a holy Scripture and peculiar Canon. Form and content are unified here; we cannot have this witness except in this form. Thus the Scripture is not a duality of divine and human "elements," but offers itself as one word, not the words of men but of these men of Israel, both truly human and therefore fallible, yet also newly human and therefore in some positive sense "perfect." To quote Professor James Barr of Edinburgh: "The finger of John the Baptist should be given a rest; he is simply not an adequate analogue for the whole range of biblical statement . . . the true analogy for the Scripture as the Word of God is *not* the unity of God and man in the

Incarnation; it is the relation of the Spirit of God to the People of God" (*Scottish Journal of Theology*, March, 1958, pp. 88f.).

Inspiration is a mean between divine revelation and human faith: it is our theological sign that God's Word to man has taken a way within history, characterized by the contingency of history as well as by the interpretative nature of historical records. It points also to the reason for the "sufficient authority" of Scripture as the canon of the Church. Authority for the canon derives from the actuality of revelation itself, of the God who chooses to address us by His Word and Spirit. And authority for revelation cannot be sought outside the circle of God's grace and Israel's faith, Israel old and new. This is a self-authenticating circle, yet not vicious because it is closed not logically but factually, in the faith and the doubt of this People. The written nature of the Church's canon is itself a marvellous sign, reminding us as it serves by ruling and rules by serving, of Him who is the servant-lord, the Canon of our canon itself.