

New Testament Interpretation in an Historical Age

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Just over a dozen years ago I prefaced the introduction to a commentary on St Mark's Gospel with the question 'Why should a Gospel be supposed to need a commentary?'¹ As the succeeding paragraphs made clear, my question reflected a problem with which I had wrestled in the course of writing the book, and with which I imagine every New Testament commentator has to wrestle, namely the question: What is an interpreter of the New Testament—or for that matter any biblical critic or scholar—seeking to do? So far as he aims to go beyond the satisfaction of simple antiquarian curiosity and bring his readers contemporary enlightenment of some sort, how should he conceive and set about his task? This lecture—which, needless to say, I am deeply honoured to have been invited to deliver—will be devoted to further, though in view of the time available, inevitably inconclusive, discussion of some aspects of that question.

At first sight, the question itself may seem an odd one. It may seem obvious what the commentator's task is, namely to make clear to his readers the meaning of his text, or at any rate to supply the background information in the light of which they can discover it for themselves. But here as so often, the occurrence of the word 'meaning', particularly when it is preceded by the definite article, is a warning-signal of the presence of confusion. What is meant by 'the meaning' of a text in this sort of connection?

Let us begin our answer by taking the example of a scholar setting out to comment on the sacred book of some ancient religion which has long since ceased to have any adherents. How will he set about his task? No doubt he will provide a modern translation of the original and add notes where they are necessary in order to make clear the precise flavour and connotations of words or phrases more fully than the translation could do by itself. Then he will describe historical events alluded to or presupposed in the text, and he will also describe the habits, institutions, presuppositions and mental preoccupations of the adherents of the

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religion, so that his readers may not only understand the historical allusions but, more important, get some idea of how the various beliefs, ritual practices and ways of behaving referred to in the text seemed to the original writer and readers to hold together as a

¹ *The Gospel of St. Mark* (Penguin Books, 1963), p. 15.

single coherent religious system. To use Collingwood's language, our commentator will seek to help his readers to think the thoughts of the religion's adherents after them, to enter imaginatively, so far as may now be possible, into what it would have been like to adopt the approach to gods, men and the rest of the environment, described or demanded in the text. When he has done that to the best of his ability, when he has shown what the text meant to its writer and original readers, he will feel that he has fully discharged his task of explaining 'the meaning'.

Much the same thing will be expected of the New Testament commentator, but in his case, at any rate if he is a Christian, there will be a further demand. It will be assumed not only that the text had a meaning for its original readers but that, in a measure at least, that meaning is still capable of being appropriated today. The presumption will be that when the stance towards God and the world suggested in the text has been properly interpreted, it will prove capable of adoption in whole or part by modern readers, even if some modifications are required in the process. The New Testament commentator is expected to make clear where and in what sense the text is still applicable, and what modifications, if any, are necessary.

He is thus set a twofold task. My point is neatly illustrated for me by a well-known modern American commentary on the Bible in twelve volumes known as *The Interpreter's Bible*.² This work, which covers the entire text of the Bible, has the same format throughout. At the top of each page is a modern translation of a portion of the text and this is followed by notes from a biblical scholar designed to make clear what it meant, in the sort of way just described. A black line is then printed across the page and in the space below it another expositor seeks to make clear how the meaning of the passage as expounded by the biblical critic may be appropriated by modern Christians. A number of those who have reviewed the series have expressed doubts about the wisdom of dividing the work between two sets of scholars, but none, so far as I know, has doubted the propriety of the enterprise as such.

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Yet it is, I believe, this twofold nature of his task which gives rise to many of the problems with which the modern commentator wrestles. Scholars often have an uneasy feeling that the two parts of the task are not readily combined, or even that they are downright incompatible. What I should like to do this afternoon is to examine this suspicion, and investigate whether it has any basis, and if so, what should be done about it. The best approach, I think, may be a genetic one. I shall ask how each of the two tasks, or parts of the task, has come to be regarded as part of what a biblical commentator is expected to do.

So far as the first part of the task is concerned, there is in one sense nothing essentially novel about it. In 1773, for example, Dr Johnson observed that 'all works which describe manners, require notes in sixty or seventy years, or less'.³ Nevertheless I want to maintain that in the form in which it imposes itself upon the commentator today, there is an

² Abingdon Press, New York and Nashville, 1951-7.

³ Boswell's *Life* (ed. Birkbeck Hill, 1887), vol. ii, p. 212.

important element of novelty in it and that this arises, as I implied by my title, because he is doing his work in an historical age.

To clarify that I must explain what I mean by describing ours as an historical age. In one sense of course every age since the emergence of *homo sapiens* has been an historical age; every age occupies some period of history. It is also true that men of every age must be, and are, concerned about what happened in the ages preceding their own; but by calling our age an historical age I do not mean to suggest that we are more concerned about the past than our predecessors were; in one sense at any rate, I am not at all sure that we are,⁴ although, as we shall see, our approach to the past is more sophisticated and more accurate.

What I have in mind is more like what Germans often have in mind when they use the word *Historismus*. It is like what I think Nietzsche meant when he said that in the nineteenth century mankind developed, or recognised, a sixth sense, the historical sense; or what R. G. Collingwood meant when he wrote that ‘The really new element in the thought of today as compared with that of three centuries ago is the rise of history’.⁵

What is chiefly in mind here is that modern man is aware in a way that his predecessors have not been, of the historically conditioned character of all human experience, speech and institutions. We are acutely aware that human life as lived in history is

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always life lived in the context of some particular cultural grouping. For every individual, no matter how original, what it means and feels like to be a human being and live a human life is to a large extent controlled by the presiding ideas of the cultural community to which it is his destiny to belong.

We see the full significance of that when we recognize that each cultural grouping is the embodiment of a peculiar set of presiding ideas—what is sometimes called the Law of its culture—and as a result has its own distinctive attitude to everything in heaven and earth. A further point is also important in this connection. Although in fact cultures vary very considerably in the character of their sensibility and of their presiding ideas, the members of a cultural community are—or at any rate have been until recently—almost entirely unaware of the contingent character of the cultural Law which moulds their outlook and all their institutions. To them the absolute validity of these ideas seems as much part of the givenness of things as the proximity of the nearby mountains or the periodic flooding of the local river.

T. E. Hulme put the point like this:

There are certain doctrines which for a particular period seem not doctrines, but inevitable categories of the human mind. Men do not look on them merely as

⁴ See e.g. J. H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (Macmillan, 1969).

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke in Drei Bänden* (Hanser, 1966), ii, pp. 686-7; R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (O.U.P., 1946), p. 209.

correct opinion, for they have become so much part of the mind, and lie so far back, that they are never really conscious of them at all. They do not see them, but other things *through* them. It is these abstract ideas at the centre, the things which they take for granted, that characterize a period. There are in each period certain doctrines, a denial of which is looked on by the men of that period just as we might look on the assertion that two and two make five. It is these abstract things at the centre, these *doctrines* felt as *facts*, which are the source of all the other material characteristics of a period ... In order to understand a period it is necessary not so much to be acquainted with its more defined opinions as with the doctrines which are thought of not as doctrine but as FACTS.⁶

These doctrines felt as facts lie so far back that not only do they pass unrecognized by those who hold them, they underlie and colour every element in a culture—its language, its science, its morals and politics, its rituals and religious beliefs, in fact its entire way of understanding, and attempting to cope with, reality. It follows that to members of a cultural community the various

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elements in their culture appear to hang together as interdependent parts of a coherent system; no one element makes full sense, or can be fully understood, except in the context of all the other elements. As Ernst Troeltsch put it, every culture is in a real sense a totality, *eine Totalitat*.⁷

When one or more of the doctrines felt as facts by a particular community come to be called in question—and the reasons why this happens are by no means fully understood as yet—the connections, associations and implications which before seemed to bind the various elements of a totality together with a certain inevitability, become problematic. Gradually a new culture grows up, based on different presiding ideas; and those who look at the old culture from the standpoint of the new one find themselves asking why their predecessors believed and acted as they did, and how they succeeded in thinking of their total outlook as coherent; for they themselves can no longer make sense of reality or unify it in the same ways. To borrow two comparatively trivial examples from Professor Butterfield, we nowadays have difficulty in understanding why it seemed self-evident to everyone for centuries that the heavenly bodies must be made of materials totally different from any familiar to us on earth or how the most acute medieval thinkers found it consistent with their idea of justice to deny that the clergy could ever be amenable to the ordinary law of the land just like everyone else.⁸

As we shall see, attention to questions of this sort can be rewarding and enlightening, but those who ask them are subject to a standing temptation, and yielding to it is the

⁶ *Speculations* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 50-1.

⁷ Cp. B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Routledge, 1922, latest edit., 1972), p. xvi. 'One of the first conditions of acceptable Ethnographic work certainly is that it should deal with the totality of all social, cultural and psychological aspects of the community, for they are so interwoven that not one can be understood without taking into consideration all the others.'

⁸ Sir Herbert Butterfield, *The Discontinuities between the Generations in History: Their Effects on the Transmission of Political Experience* (C.U.P., 1972), pp. 5-6; and Cp. B. Malinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 176, 'Nothing is so misleading ... as the description of facts of native civilisations in terms of our own.'

supreme treason in this field. The temptation is to answer the questions, not in terms of the cultural assumptions of the original community but in terms of the questioner's own assumptions. Warning examples are the grievous misunderstanding of eighteenth-century politics by nineteenth-century historians who, as Butterfield puts it, 'knew no better than to read the activities of 1760 in the light of the politics of 1860'; or the writings of the theologians who, according to Father Nicholas Lash, 'regularly misinterpreted the decree of the Council of Trent as a result of reading it through post-Tridentine spectacles' and so seriously misled the Roman Catholic church for centuries.⁹

Closely connected with this characteristic of an historical age is

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another. Accounts of historical events and cultures which reach us from the past are coloured by the cultural attitudes and assumptions of those from whom they emanated, and so we can never accept them at their face value. We have to treat them as a court of law treats the statements of witnesses, as raw material for its own verdict. We have to compare and contrast these accounts, to cross-examine them, making allowances for the doctrines felt as facts at the time when they originated, and so arrive at our own verdict, an account consonant with integrity in our cultural situation.

It requires no special perspicacity to see that all this poses considerable problems for a religious tradition which claims, as the Christian tradition has been accustomed to do, that the essential truth of things was revealed once for all in the context of the life, outlook and institutions of one particular cultural community. What are those who live under other cultural laws to make of that revelation? To that question some of the most perceptive theologians of our time are addressing themselves and I cannot hope to make any direct contribution to the general debate this afternoon. My aim is the more modest one of asking some questions about how the New Testament scholar may best prepare himself to make his contribution.

For there can be no doubt that his work is affected. At first sight it might seem as if religious attitudes and beliefs were exempt from the cultural pressures and particularities I have been describing. God, if he exists, is unchanging, and what he has done in the past he has done; there is a certain satisfying irreformability about past actions, human or divine. The briefest reflection, however, will show that this will not do. It is agreed in all religions that we cannot speak literally about God. Where the supernatural is concerned, language can only be used non-literally or metaphorically, and the meaning a term conveys when used metaphorically is controlled by the meaning it has when used literally. If God is described as father, for example, the meaning will depend on the literal understanding of fatherhood, and that varies widely from culture to culture; for instance, the emphasis may be on the act of begetting or on the way the child is treated, once begotten. For this and allied reasons, religion is not an entirely transcultural phenomenon. Language and beliefs about God in any community are inextricably tied in with its language and beliefs about everything else. Thus

⁹ Butterfield, *op. cit.*, p. 7. Lash, *Change in Focus* (Sheed and Ward, 1973), p. 42.

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Professor J. S. Dunne can state unequivocally that ‘any concrete formulation of a religion ... has to integrate it with a culture’, and his book *The City of the Gods* is one of those which has gone a long way towards demonstrating the point empirically.¹⁰

Indeed, recent developments in religious anthropology serve to illustrate and reinforce the point. At least up till the end of the last century anthropologists commonly studied religion as a transcultural phenomenon; at any rate they took such religious phenomena as magic or witchcraft, provided a general definition of each, listed examples from a wide variety of religions and then tried to formulate a general theory of how men came to believe and engage in such practices. In this century, however, intensive fieldwork such as that of Malinowski among the Trobriand Islanders or Evans-Pritchard among the Azande has led to a marked change of attitude. It has become clear that a community’s religious beliefs and practices can only properly be understood and appreciated in the context of that community’s total outlook and life-situation. Religious beliefs and practices bear a specific meaning and are justified in relation to a particular religious community and its universe by discourse, and *only* in that relation. Some words of Mr Don Cupitt about religious beliefs and practices are apposite. They are, he says, ‘different in different societies, and each one must be explained in terms of its own setting-in-life’. Whatever may have been the case in the past, he goes on, today ‘we are more likely to hear it said that belief in God can only be accurately discussed with reference to a specific case, where what counts as God, as belief, and as the criterion of right belief have had assigned to them the definite value proper to them in a particular community. The Muslim, for example, is not talking about God in a general... way, but about the God-whose-prophet-is-Muhammad, the One God whose revelation of his will is embodied in Islamic religious Law. That is, by ‘God’ the Muslim means the One who is known and served only through the study of a certain sacred book, and certain practices... He does *not* suppose that true belief in the one True God, Allah, is abstractable from this very detailed context. The context is essential.’¹¹

So far as there is truth in all this, its implications for the interpreter of the New Testament will be obvious enough. He is bound to reflect that in virtually every respect the culture of New

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Testament times differed widely from any culture to which he is likely to belong in the modern west. Whatever the subject—science, morality, medicine, genetics, psychology, astronomy, demonology—the assumptions will have been almost completely different. If, therefore, it is true, as we have seen it is, that every concrete formulation of a religion must be integrated with a particular culture, then the more fully he probes the New Testament formulation of the Christian faith, the more fully he will show it to be

¹⁰ *The Way of All the Earth* (Sheldon Press, 1973), p. 126. *The City of the Gods* (Sheldon Press, 1973).

¹¹ The quotations, and some of the ideas in the section preceding them, are taken from an extremely interesting, but so far unpublished, broadcast talk entitled ‘Justification of Belief in God’. For examples of the sort of work referred to see B. Malinowski, *op. cit.* and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (O.U.P., 1937).

integrated with an alien culture, and the more difficult it will be to represent it as a faith which can be integrated, in anything like its original form, with a culture *toto coelo* different such as our own. You see why he feels as he does about the two sides of his task.

It is scarcely necessary for me to add that I appreciate and sympathize fully with his predicament, because I have already explained how I have felt the full force of it myself. Nevertheless, the more I reflect on the matter, the more I am inclined to feel that the dilemma is an unreal one and the anxiety unnecessary.

In order to justify that feeling I must now turn to the second part of the New Testament interpreter's task as it is commonly understood. What are we to make of the assumption that the religion of the New Testament as uncovered by a modern New Testament critic should be, broadly at least, capable of adoption by a modern Christian as it stands?

Once again I shall adopt a genetic approach. Although it means going well beyond the bounds of any competence I can claim, I venture to suggest that this assumption is not one which derives from the nature of Christianity as such and is therefore valid in all cultural situations, but that it is a highly contingent assumption which, as it stands, derives from the particular circumstances of the Reformation.

In the Christian centuries before the Reformation the religion which originated in the New Testament events received a variety of concrete formulations as a result of being integrated with a variety of cultures. The various systems of belief and practice which resulted diverged so far from New Testament faith and practice that they would no doubt have caused a good deal of eyebrow-raising among New Testament Christians, even if they had been accepted by them as recognizably Christian. These divergences, however, were scarcely recognized by Christians of

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the patristic and medieval periods, and caused them little embarrassment for a number of reasons. No doubt they assumed a general congruence between their faith and practice and those of New Testament times, but then their outlook was extremely un-historical in the sense in which I am using the word historical, and they were therefore unaware of the scale of the anachronism involved in their assumption.

We must also remember that for all the Christians of these periods the Bible was supplemented by an authoritative tradition which considerably modified the picture of primitive Christianity which would have emerged from the New Testament taken by itself and studied historically.

Thirdly, their habit of interpreting the Bible in allegorical and other non-literal ways gave them wide scope for manoeuvre when it came to deciding what was, or was not, in line with New Testament Christianity.

Finally, the patristic and medieval periods were relatively homogeneous philosophically, at any rate in the sense that all thinkers adopted the *philosophia perennis* in one or another of its fairly closely related forms. As a consequence, they assumed that anything which seemed to them to follow logically from the New Testament was an inescapable logical implication of the text *sans phrase*. They were unaware that in an area as complex as this, what passes as an inescapable logical conclusion depends on the character of the particular cultural Law under which the deduction is made.

So if we leave aside a few such relatively isolated figures as the so-called Anonymous of York, we may say that in this period the relation of contemporary faith and practice to the teaching of the New Testament gave rise to no very acute problems; but the situation changes sharply at the Reformation. Whatever we may think of their reasons, the Reformers were led to deny that the Christianity in which they had been brought up was the genuine article. Since the recognized religious authorities of the age—Popes, Councils, Schoolmen—were against them in this contention, their only recourse was to appeal to the one recognized authority they believed was on their side, namely the text of scripture.

It certainly *was* on their side to the extent that when studied in its literal—or as they would have put it, grammatical or historical-

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sense, and independently of most of the traditions, it compelled recognition that medieval Catholicism was a very different thing from New Testament Christianity; and no doubt the Reformers were right in detecting various abuses in the Church of their day. Where I want to suggest that they were wrong, from our point of view, was in supposing the medieval Christianity, or indeed the Christianity of any post-New Testament period, *ought* to be, or could be, identical with the New Testament faith. In fact the Reformers did not make quite that claim. For one thing they recognized the need for some variations as the result of historical developments, and they also retained the medieval belief that the major deductions made from the New Testament by the Councils of the early centuries were inescapable corollaries and timelessly valid implications of it. It was, I imagine, this sort of thing that the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England had in mind when they asserted of Holy Scripture 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’. Similarly Luther shows that for him the findings of the early Fathers were an integral part of the true faith when he writes in his short catechism ‘I believe that Jesus Christ, very God, born of the Father in eternity, and also very man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed *me*, a lost and damned man, and has won and delivered *me* from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil...’¹² This, Luther’s *pro me*, also shows, incidentally, what a travesty of his position it would be to suggest that he regarded acceptance of the tenets of the New Testament, even the most slavish, as constituting a Christian. Christian discipleship was *sola fide*, and *fides* embraced far more than that. Nevertheless, the acceptance of the entire New Testament teaching in its

¹² Article VI. For the Luther quotation see H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (O.U.P., 1946), p. 288.

original meaning, so far as that could be determined, was for the Reformers the necessary condition of salvation. Just as nothing which was not read in, or proved by, Scripture could be proclaimed as an article of faith, so belief in everything which *was* read in, or could be proved by, Scripture was demanded of every Christian. Everyone knows of the attempts made at the Reformation to base even the *minutiae* of liturgy and Church order on the precise New Testament model.

To characterize this attitude on the part of the Reformers as an

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error from our point of view implies no condemnation. It is easy to see in retrospect how such an attitude was natural enough in the circumstances. Theirs was still an essentially un-historical age and their outlook, for all its undoubted differences from that of New Testament times, was still close enough to it for their attitude to appear plausible. Their societies were still non-industrial, non-mechanized societies, with methods of agriculture, means of communication and an outlook on natural science not radically different from those of their predecessors; and their horizons, so far as concerns matters of astronomy and cosmology, chronology, psychology, demonology, medicine and the rest, were not all that wider than those of the biblical writers. It is wise to bear in mind in this connection the striking observation of Dr Charles Galton Darwin, that culturally 'London in 1750 was far more like Rome in AD 100 than like either London or Rome in 1950'.¹³

By the time the thought of the Enlightenment gave rise to doubt whether the entire religion of the New Testament was compatible with a modern outlook, historical study had advanced sufficiently to be able to suggest what seemed a possible *modus vivendi*. The authority of the New Testament writers rests on their status as witnesses to Jesus. Very well, then, let it be assumed that because of their relatively primitive cultural stage—you notice the modern historical outlook beginning to appear—they were, quite unwittingly, imperfect witnesses. Let their evidence be subjected to historical cross-examination—the modern outlook again—and it would emerge that the real Jesus, the Jesus of History, as he came to be called, was reflected only distortedly in their pages and had in fact been a figure whose teaching and example could well be taken over exactly as they stood by men of the Enlightenment and subsequent periods. In this particular—and of course, attenuated—form, the Reformation principle that a faith appropriate for contemporary man was to be found just as it stood in the pages of the New Testament was the central plank in the liberal protestant platform right down to the early years of this century.

What has happened since then is that the searchlight of a much more fully developed historical method has been turned on the New Testament accounts of Jesus and as a result several things have become clear.

First, that the historical truth about him cannot be known with

¹³ *The Next Million Years* (Hart-Davis, 1952), p. 49.

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anything like the fullness claimed by nineteenth-century liberal scholars.

Secondly, that their supposed knowledge of him rested largely on their having yielded to the historian's arch-temptation, that of reading a story from one culture through the spectacles of another.

Thirdly, that so far as the real Jesus can be discerned, he, like the New Testament witnesses to him, belongs essentially to the culture of his time and place; there is no real reason to think that the outlook of the historical Jesus will have been such as to be any more immediately acceptable today than that of, let us say, the historical Paul.

A whole epoch of New Testament study may be said to have come to an end when Father Tyrrell realized in the early years of this century with regard to Harnack that, as he puts it, 'The Christ [he] sees looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well', and Albert Schweitzer wrote at about the same time 'Jesus of Nazareth will not suffer himself to be modernized. As an historic figure he refuses to be detached from his own time ... the historic Jesus and the Germanic spirit [i.e. the *modern* German spirit] cannot be brought together except by an act of historic violence which in the end injures both religion and history'.¹⁴ No scholar today supposes that New Testament Christianity as it stands is a possible religion for modern western man, or that the character, conduct and beliefs of Jesus, even if we knew far more about them than we do, could constitute as they stand the content of a modern faith.

In view of all that, it might perhaps have been expected that all attempts to find a modern faith more or less ready-made in the pages of the New Testament would have been dropped. As Schweitzer put it: Jesus 'has no answer for the question, "Tell us Thy name in our speech and for our day" ';¹⁵ but in fact the Reformation tradition has been carried on in another form, also attenuated, but attenuated in a different way. It has been widely claimed in the last half-century or so that in one thing at least the New Testament writers were objectively right, right in a way valid for all cultural situations, namely in claiming that the career of Jesus constituted a unique divine intervention in history, that is, an

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intervention qualitatively different from any other intervention in the whole history of the universe whether by way of providence or grace. Indeed, acceptance of the occurrence of such an intervention in and through Jesus has been made the *articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae*.

¹⁴ The Tyrrell quotation is from *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*, published posthumously in 1909, p. 44. For Schweitzer see *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (A. & C. Black, 1910, the E.T. of a German original published in 1906), pp. 310-11.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

Although the claim has been more or less universal, it has been made in varied forms, the variations centring mainly on two questions: first how the career of Jesus can be *known* to have constituted such an intervention; and secondly what the intervention achieved.

With regard to the first question, theologians in the Lutheran tradition have tended to say that the New Testament events can be recognized as a unique divine intervention *sola fide*. Just as it was only through supernatural illumination, responded to in faith, that the earliest Christians recognized the truth of what they saw, so it is only by faith, usually granted through preaching, that the truth can be recognized today. It follows that the scope of historical and linguistic work on the New Testament text is strictly limited. However competently carried out, it can never by itself disclose the supernatural character of the events it studies, any more than actually seeing those events disclosed it to the faithless among the contemporaries of Jesus. It is only as a consequence of the gift of faith that a New Testament commentator will be able to recognize the true meaning of his text or pass it on to his readers, though the application of his historical and linguistic skills may be able to clarify, deepen and give greater precision to, the faith-insight, once granted.

On any such view, the two sides of the commentator's task are sharply distinguished, and the primary qualification for a commentator is the possession of faith. To it his historical and linguistic activities are essentially subordinate; if, for example, they were to lead him to an interpretation of the text incompatible with that of faith, he would be told: 'You obviously do not possess faith, or you would see things in another light.' What the light would be will depend on the perspective of the speaker. If he is a Barthian, for example, he will assume the work God was doing through the New Testament events was basically what patristic and Lutheran orthodoxy has always assumed; if he is a disciple of Bultmann on the other hand, God's action, though mythologically described in the

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New Testament, will be taken to have been the making possible of 'authentic' human existence in an existentialist sense.

Such a position is clearly logically invulnerable. If a scholar claims that the meaning of certain past events has been supernaturally revealed to him and that any historical reconstruction of those events incompatible with this revealed meaning is *ipso facto* shown to be mistaken, there can be no arguing with him. In a country like this, however, where philosophers put so high a value on empirical verifiability, such logical invulnerability may not be altogether a recommendation; and certainly this position is radically un-historical. Historical investigation can have little, if any, part to play in determining which of the interpretations alleged to be revealed is the right one; and in many of its forms this position has the added disadvantage that it posits a trans-cultural interpretation of God's unique intervention. Barth in particular demands that a modern Christian should work with categories which belong to fifth-century and sixteenth-century cultures and have no natural link with the rest of his *Weltanschauung*—are indeed irresolubly paradoxical within it. Moreover a position such as Barth's involves doing what we have seen to be contrary to

modern historical practice—taking a past generation’s account of its own times more or less entirely at its face value.

Partly for these reasons, the approach in England has for some time been significantly different. Here there has been little tendency to subordinate historico-critical study of the New Testament events; rather such study has been relied on to reveal and confirm the unique character of the events. The assumption has been that if the interpreter does his work in a judicious and unprejudiced fashion, the picture of events which will emerge will demand interpretation in categories which are broadly those of the New Testament—or at any rate will make such interpretation highly plausible. The picture will be such that only the categories of the New Testament, and ultimately those of credal orthodoxy, will do justice to it.

Of recent years at any rate, English scholars have agreed that not all the history and interpretation contained in the New Testament can be accepted today; but the claim has been maintained that if the investigation is carried on in a moderate and judicious way, there will be found to be what Professor H. E. W. Turner

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calls ‘an adequate dovetail’ between the New Testament interpretation ‘and the ascertainable facts’.¹⁶

It is important to be clear just what and how much is here being claimed. In the nineteenth century, English scholars such as Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort, or William Sanday in Oxford, put forward what amounted to a full-scale appeal to history. They argued that unless the reality of a unique divine intervention of the sort claimed in the New Testament was accepted, it was impossible to make historical sense of events in first-century Palestine. In particular they argued that unless Jesus had literally and physically risen from the dead, it was impossible to account for the complete change of attitude on the part of his disciples in the four or five days after the crucifixion.

Despite the superficial similarity between this and some of the things said by Professor Moule in the correspondence between him and Mr Cupitt published in the periodical *Theology* two or three years ago,¹⁷ few English scholars today attempt to maintain such a position. Indeed they would be hard put to it to do so in view of the fact that so many highly competent historians—the great majority of modern historians in fact—find it possible to offer an account of the rise of Christianity which seems to them and most of their readers perfectly plausible and yet has no recourse to any miraculous resurrection or unique divine intervention. Accordingly, in the hands of such theologians as Professor Turner, or the late Dr Alan Richardson, the character of the argument has altered. It is now conceded that it is possible to make some sort of sense of the New Testament events without recourse to the occurrence of a special divine intervention; but it is suggested that reconstructions which do this rest on positivistic and sceptical presuppositions which are arbitrary, not particularly plausible, and by no means demanded by incontestable facts or

¹⁶ *Historicity and the Gospels* (Mowbray, 1963), p. 25. See also p. 33.

¹⁷ See *Theology*, vol. LXXV, Oct. 1972, pp. 507-19.

discoveries. The argument is that on the basis of other presuppositions at least equally plausible and equally compatible with integrity even in an historical age, the most natural reconstruction of the New Testament evidence is broadly that of the New Testament itself.

Such a position is not to be lightly dismissed, but on the other hand it could only be called an appeal to history in a somewhat Pickwickian sense. It is in fact a defensive posture and it is obvious where its motivation lies: in a determination to maintain the

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Christian faith combined with a conviction that faith stands or falls by the occurrence of a unique, once for all, divine intervention in New Testament times.

Now this last assumption—that Christianity stands or falls by belief in a unique incarnation—has begun to be subjected to questioning on doctrinal and philosophical grounds. In this country, for example, it has recently been questioned in various ways by such scholars as Mr Cupitt, Professor Wiles, Dr Anthony Dyson and Father Harry Williams.¹⁸ What I should like to see would be New Testament scholars subjecting it to like questioning in their own sphere. This would mean their forswearing all apologetic attempts to show that the New Testament evidence is compatible with this or that dogmatic belief, and simply setting out to explore the nature of New Testament Christianity in the same impartial spirit in which Malinowski investigated the religion of the Trobriand Islanders or Evans-Pritchard that of the Azande.

I am aware that as soon as I say that I shall be accused of begging the entire question. It will be pointed out that impartial, or what Strauss called presuppositionless, interpretation of the New Testament is impossible. My critics will say that if the possibility of any genuinely unique occurrence is ruled out in advance, primitive Christianity is bound to be found a natural religion, in principle of the same sort as the religion of the Trobriand Islanders or the Azande.

Such criticism, however, would misunderstand what I have in mind. Scholars working as I desiderate would not rule out any possibility *a priori*. They would simply behave as characteristic representatives of an historical age, assuming as a working hypothesis the truth of its presuppositions, including its assumption, at any rate in Barraclough's modified form,¹⁹ that all past events form a single causally interconnected web and that no event occurs without this-worldly causation of some sort. They would then see how far it is possible to do justice to the evidence of the New Testament without going beyond those assumptions. They could, after all, plead that Occam's razor cuts as cleanly in historical study as in any other sphere, and that entities such as unique interventions ought not to be multiplied beyond strict necessity. In this case some such occurrence may in the end prove inescapable, but not unless and until its necessity has been clearly

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¹⁸ See e.g. M. F. Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (S.C.M., 1974). O. Dyson, *Who is Jesus Christ?* (S.C.M., 1969). H. A. Williams, *Poverty, Chastity and Obedience* (Beazley, 1975).

¹⁹ See Geoffrey Barraclough, *History in a Changing World* (Blackwell, 1956). e.g. pp. 4-5.

demonstrated. No other procedure could really claim to be an appeal to history.

What would concern me above all is that these scholars should avoid the historian's temptation. I would have them be scrupulously careful to see that all New Testament language and ideas were interpreted in their own context. Remember Mr Cupitt's words 'the context is essential'. I am not of course advocating the 'intentionalist fallacy' or suggesting that no meaning may be attributed to a text beyond what its original author consciously intended; but for our purposes it is essential that the presuppositions in the light of which the text is interpreted should be the doctrines-felt-as-facts by first-century men, and not by the Fathers, the Reformers or people of our time. This would mean, for example, that New Testament accounts of the past had to be read in the light of the fact that people's attitudes to accounts of the past used to be very different from what they are today. As late as the Renaissance, a painter could quite happily represent the Emperor Constantine, let us say, or King David dressed as a Renaissance prince, surrounded by Renaissance courtiers and framed in a perspective of Renaissance buildings. There was no intention to deceive; the intention was simply to make clear that what a Renaissance prince was in *his* day—a wise, powerful and generous leader of his people in peace and war—King David and the Emperor Constantine had been in theirs. That was the primary aim: to represent people and events of the past in such a way as to bring out what was believed to be their true significance, natural and supernatural.

Our scholars would also have to be clear that where they were interpreting the word *theos* in the New Testament, for example, the reference was to Yahweh, the God of the Jews, as understood in the first century, and not to the God of the Schoolmen or the modern philosophical theologian. Similarly all New Testament talk about sacrifice would have to be interpreted in the light of the doctrine felt by the author to the Hebrews as a fact too obvious to need justification: that remission of sins is simply impossible without the shedding of some blood.²⁰ The aim would be to show what sort of a unity the various ideas and practices formed in the eyes of New Testament Christians and then how, when belief in the end of the world failed to justify itself, the remaining beliefs formed a

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different sort of unity for Christians of the fourth and fifth centuries.

It would be idle to speculate very much about the results of such an approach because I do not believe such an approach has ever been made in any systematic or sustained way. It would for example, involve cooperation with anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and experts in the comparative study of religions on a scale not hitherto contemplated, though a work such as J. M. Hull's recent book on the Lucan writings, for example, shows that the penny is beginning to drop.²¹

I confess I should not be altogether surprised if those who adopted such an approach concluded that, while the events of Jesus' career were such as to demand interpretation in

²⁰ Heb. 9²².

²¹ J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (S.C.M., 1974)

terms of a unique—indeed literally final—divine intervention *given the presuppositions of certain circles in first century Jewish culture*, they might not have seemed to demand such interpretation given different cultural assumptions, for example to a modern western observer if such a one—twentieth-century presuppositions and all—could be carried back to first-century Palestine on some magic carpet or infernal time machine. It may be worth adding that if that were the conclusion, it would not necessarily rob the events of their profound religious significance. It would still be possible to see the God whose hand is everywhere behind the first-century events which launched the early Christians into a relation with himself so intimate and vivid, that, given their presuppositions, they were led to posit a final and decisive intervention on his part to account for it. And it would be possible to interpret their sense of intimate and vivid relationship with God as having been exactly what it seemed to them to be.

However, I must leave all such matters on one side in order to deal with one further question. If scholars approached the New Testament in the way I suggest, would they have any positive contributions to make beyond satisfying our antiquarian curiosity? I believe they would, and the place from which I should begin to develop a justification for my belief, had I the time, would be from the argument of Professor J. S. Dunne's remarkable recent book *The Way of All the Earth*. In that book the author points out how large a part is played in our spiritual progress, both individual and corporate, by the process he describes as 'passing over', that is,

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passing over to, and living again, earlier periods of our own lives, individual and corporate, and the lives of other groups and other ages. I am convinced that whatever form Christianity has to take if it is to be properly integrated with any modern culture, its adherents will always find it necessary and enriching to pass over to the rock from whence they were hewn, the faith and experience of New Testament Christianity, just as they will also want to pass over to the faith of the Fathers, the Schoolmen and the Reformers. Professor Dunne writes: 'Whenever a man passes over to other lives or other times, he finds on coming back, some neglected aspect of his own life or times which correspond to what he saw in others. Passing over has the effect of activating otherwise dormant aspects of himself.'²² Exactly what the benefits will be it is impossible to specify, certainly in the time at my disposal, especially as Professor Dunne himself writes that 'each time a man passes over into God he can see worlds that have never been seen before. If such experience of God is finite, then no man has seen all there is to see'.²³

One thing, however, is certain; if this process of passing over to primitive Christianity is to be truly enriching, it must be genuinely the Christianity of the New Testament to which we pass over. Some words of the American literary-critic Lionel Trilling are apposite at this point:

it is [he writes] only if we are aware of the reality of the past as past that we can feel it as alive and present. If, for example, we try to make Shakespeare literally

²² *op. cit.*, p. 180.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

contemporaneous, we make him monstrous. He is contemporaneous only if we know how much a man of his own age he was; he is relevant to us only if we see his distance from us. Or to take a poet closer to us in actual time, Wordsworth's Immortality Ode is acceptable to us only when it is understood to have been written at a certain past moment; if it had appeared much later than it did, if it were offered to us now as a contemporary work, we would not admire it ... In the pastness of these works lies the assurance of their validity and relevance'.²⁴

That exactly expresses what I want to see—New Testament Christianity displayed in its pastness, with its various doctrines, rituals and commandments exhibited in the sort of unity they seemed to form in the context of first-century cultural assumptions. Such a reconstruction would not be easy, if only because in the case

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of the New Testament we have for the most part the myth without the ritual, a very misleading thing to have, as any student of religions will tell you.²⁵

Certainly such a reconstruction is not available as yet. For all their genuinely good intentions,²⁶ Christian interpreters of the New Testament, because they believed themselves to be faced with a twofold task, have tried to face two ways, have halted between two opinions. They have been aware of the peril of modernising Jesus and the early Church, yet they have been loth to search them out in their full particularity and pastness for fear that in that form they would not speak directly to our condition. Thus they have interpreted New Testament accounts of the past as if they had been written by men who shared our attitude to the past; they have attributed to Jesus that essentially modern hybrid, 'realized eschatology'; they have read New Testament teaching on sacrifice, the wrath of God and the rest, as if they had been produced by men who shared our understanding of the Old Testament, the nature and demands of God and much else beside. They have discovered in the New Testament a degree of unity and homogeneity it does not possess. The result is that the Jesus, the Paul, the Mark, the John of these interpreters and commentaries have been what Professor Trilling calls them, 'monstrous'-figures that never were on sea or land.²⁷ Schweitzer rightly pointed out that the truly historical Jesus was bound to be 'to our time a stranger and an enigma,' incapable of

²⁴ *The Liberal Imagination* (Mercury Books, London, 1964), p. 186.

²⁵ The difficulty mentioned is only one aspect of a wider difficulty which is succinctly expressed by Sir Herbert Butterfield: 'there exist... subtle and delicate differences, some of them in the realm perhaps of presuppositions—things not always avowed, indeed things which men do not always know to quarrel about, such ideas and assumptions being so much part of the air that one breathes. They are things that the men of 1600 shall we say ... do not have to explain to one another, and the result is that they do not always get into the historian's evidence'. (*op. cit.*, p. 6). i.e. not only do the presuppositions and ideas of the New Testament writers often pose problems for us when we know them; in many cases we do not even know what their underlying ideas and assumptions were. Cp. also the discussion of the '*inponderabilia*' in Malinowski, *op. cit.*, chap. 1, § VII.

²⁶ In view of some of the plain speaking which follows, I should like to emphasize the last four words. I am far from wishing to suggest that any of those referred to have had any conscious intention other than that of discovering and communicating the truth to the very best of their ability.

²⁷ Cp. Malinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 157. 'This error is due to the same cause which lies at the bottom of all our misconceptions about people of different cultures ... If you measure [a man] by moral, legal or economic standards ... essentially foreign to him, you cannot but obtain a caricature in your estimate.'

‘being made sympathetic and universally intelligible to the multitude by a popular historical treatment.’²⁸ Could that language be used of the founder of Christianity as pictured by C. H. Dodd²⁹ or of the existentialist Jesus of Bultmann and his followers, with his very twentieth-century refusal to furnish any credentials or to make any messianic claims? Are not these woefully hybrid figures, precisely the products of reading an ancient text through modern spectacles?

At least the approach I call for would go as far as it is possible to go in making New Testament Christianity in its genuine pastness available to us, so that we could ‘pass over’ to it. Something of the significance of that is hinted at in the following words from R. G. Collingwood’s *Autobiography*, ‘if what the historian knows is past thoughts, and if he knows them by re-thinking them himself, it follows that the knowledge he achieves by historical enquiry is

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not knowledge of his situation as opposed to knowledge of himself, it is a knowledge of his situation which is at the same time knowledge of himself. In re-thinking what somebody else thought, he thinks it himself. In knowing that somebody else thought it, he knows that he himself is able to think it. And finding out what he is able to do is finding out what kind of a man he is.’³⁰

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<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 397.

²⁹ E.g. in his surely much over-praised book *The Founder of Christianity* (Collins, 1971). In fairness to Dodd it should perhaps be added that the substance of this book was embodied in lectures delivered as early as 1954; that, however, cannot mitigate criticism of the basic methodological flaws it exhibits.

³⁰ (Penguin Books, 1944), p. 78.