Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century

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The seventeenth century has often been seen as a century of revolution, a period when royal claims withered before the relentless advance of the power of Parliament and when traditional forms of thought in the realms of science and religion were eroded by empirical research and by aggressive nonconformity. /1

This reading of the situation has recently come under heavy criticism and much emphasis has been placed upon the tenacious conservatism of the period and upon the way in which revolutionary constitutional and religious movements were tamed and neutralized. Professor J.P. Kenyon can now write of the years after 1660 as a period of "an exaggeratedly conservative reaction which swept away - as if it had never been - the so-called English Revolution of the 1640s. /2 Moving on to 1714 he can conclude that the constitution which emerged as a result of the accession of William and Mary and of the Hanoverians was not a parliamentary monarchy but an aristocratic monarchy. /3

In unravelling the complex web of religious life during the seventeenth century later historians, and especially those with interests in the social and political ramifications of ecclesiastical affairs, have seen in the panorama of dissenting movements ranging from reluctant nonconformists to revolutionary sectarians the segment of society which contained the period's most influential manifestation of theological thought and religious practice. However, this view also needs not a little deflation. Nonconformists were never anywhere a majority of the people and, as for the revolutionary threat which they seemed to pose to political stability, this failed to come to permanent fruition. The Civil War was far from being a crusade by apocalyptic revolutionaries against the existing order in society; it seemed far more like a struggle for power within the traditional ruling class. Even Cromwell's rule was far from being what would now be called a dictatorship of the proletariat though even then it was sufficiently novel and alarming to drive many into the movement to restore the monarchy.

A surer guide to the prevailing trend of current theological thought in the century is to be found in the sermons and writings of the bishops of the Church of England than in the serious prolixity of puritan preachers, the frenzied fervour of evanescent orators, or the novel speculations of dissonant voices. John Milton and Isaac Watts have been accorded great renown as influential nonconformists who had a decisive role in shaping English culture and hymnology. Yet in their own day their influence was confined to limited circles. Milton ended his life in blindness, loneliness and not a little despair; Watt was also a frail and reclusive figure depending for shelter upon the generosity of Lady Abner. Moreover, when they achieved later renown it was on the strength of their poetical works which embodied the traditional orthodox doctrinal framework or which at least could be read in that sense and which have become the acknowledged treasure of all the Churches. It is only in recent years that the christological deviations of Watts and the doctrinal, ethical and social speculations of Milton have received attention. /4 Further, it has been held that Thomas Hobbes was representative of a substantial group of subversive thinkers whose teaching led to atheism, but Hobbes never claimed to be an atheist; indeed, the idea of God looms large in his thought, and it has been argued that it is central to his thought, though others have maintained that it could be eliminated from his writings without seriously affecting his teaching and that he only introduced the idea into his speculations as an insurance against the penalties likely to befall anyone who had the temerity to question the existence of God. However, even if there was a group of subversive thinkers, they had remarkably little effect in shaking the current patterns of thought. /5 Professor G.E. Aylmer has said that a self-confessed atheist was a rare figure in the century; "those who explicitly denied the existence of God are hard to find." /6

The dominant and persisting strand of religious thought was to be found in the outlook and teaching of the bishops of the Church of England. Many of them were men of ability who would have risen high in any profession and they were a cohesive group, shaped as they were by their close ties with the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and with the

Court and the nobility. /7 They owed their promotion to their accord with the climate of thought and conduct to be found in those circles and which permeated the general outlook in society far more than might be thought if attention were to be concentrated on the vast number of turbulent pamphlets which poured forth from many presses, and even these often blended a theological conservatism with their fiery and political agitation.

The coherence of the episcopal outlook can be seen in their treatment of the Bible. The bishops claimed that it was penned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the text had been preserved through the centuries and was what God wanted it to be. In view of its divine origin, texts could be taken from any and every part of the Bible and used to teach matters of faith and morals and of government, history and science. John Hacket of Lichfield was typical in affirming the unique authority of the Bible:

> "We are penned up into the Scripture as into sheepfolds, and while we contain ourselves within them we are safe; the wolf may howl but he cannot bite us"

Jeremy Taylor, who became bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore and gained a reputation as a devout scholar and rigid disciplinarian, said,

> "If any man calls himself a Christian, he believes all that is in the Canon of Scripture, and therefore if he did not he were indeed no Christian."

John Bramhall, who first as bishop of Derry and then as archbishop of Armagh imposed a firm episcopal policy upon the Church of Ireland, was equally firm in his teaching on the Bible:

> "God, who hath given the Holy Scriptures to his Church to be the key to his revealed counsels, the anchor of hope, the evidence of their blessedness, will not suffer those Scriptures to be corrupted in anything that is fundamental and necessary."

John Cosin of Durham held that the Creator could not possibly have left his creatures without a clear and permanent statement of his intentions, far more definite than any-

thing to be derived from the flickering light of reason;

> "From this Scripture which is the word and will of God all the rules of our life and all the articles of our belief must of reason be drawn." /11

Ralph Brownrig of Exeter was a spacious exponent of the view that since the Scriptures were the oracles of God they had a closely woven texture which at all points bore witness to Christ who was the sum and scope of all their predictions. Christ was

> "Adam's promised seed, Abraham's Isaac, Jacob's Shiloh, Moses his great prophet, Esau's Immanuel, Jeremiah's man compassed with a woman, Ezekial's shepherd, Daniel's holy one, Zechariah's branch, Malachi's Angel". /12

Taking another sweep through the Bible he found Christ to be Abel's sacrifice, Noel's dove, Abraham's first fruits, Isaac's ram, Jacob's ladder, Moses his Passover, Aaron's rod, the Israelite's rock, the Patriarch's manna, David's tabernacle and Solomon's temple. /13

This belief in the divine authorship of the scriptures, their total consistency and their hidden witness to Christ was the basic conviction of these episcopal preachers and their belief was not shaken by problems arising from the formation of the Canon, by difficulties of translation, by textual obscurities, or by the possibility that the text as it now is had come into being through the weaving together of earlier and diverse strands of tradition. They were far too learned to be unaware of many problems of text and interpretation but they were confident that these problems would prove to be peripheral and that careful study would so resolve the issues that their basic conviction would be unshaken.

Bramhall held that while there was need to secure the best text and the soundest interpretation arguments about variant readings and meanings were to be deplored; neither the weakest text nor the worst translation was far off the mark, and public wranglings on such issues were "liable to shake that Christian faith which is radicated in the heart"; "To suffer the sacred writ to be questioned in a word or syllable was to weaken the authority and lessen the venerable estimation of the whole text." /14

John Tillotson, the archbishop of Canterbury at the end of the century, laid down the axiom that the various books of the Bible had gained their place in the Canon in virtue of their internal claims. The witness of the NT to the Old, the reliability of the records insofar as it is possible to test them, and the authorship of the NT by the inspired Apostles or by men under their tutelage, all these factors attested the integrity of the existing Canon; no other books had a comparable claim to inclusion. Neither ecclesiastical nor civil rulers could adjudicate on the question of what constituted the Canon:

> "The Church cannot make a book canonical which was not so before; if it was not canonical at first, it cannot be made so afterward." /15

Similarly, Edward Reynolds of Norwich accepted without question the existing Canon and held that its authority was established by its perspicacity in "all necessary truth". /16 Seth Ward, bishop of Exeter and then of Salisbury, held that Christ's use of the OT was more than sufficient authentication of its canonicity, and as for the NT there was no dissentient doctrine in any of its books which were written in the order in which they were placed in the Testament and also by the authors whose names they bore. /17

However, even allowing the fixed bounds of the Canon and the reliability of the text, there were baffling problems of interpretation. Many passages were differently interpreted by various preachers and it was also recognized that there were OT passages attributing to God deeds of vengeance and genocide which would need ingenious interpretation if they were to be given a meaning compatible with the definition of God as righteous, just and merciful. Lancelot Andrewes, successively bishop of Chichester, Ely and Winchester, was one of the translators of the Authorised version of the Bible and his advocacy and use of the new translation were powerful factors in its rapid superseding of all other translations. He held that the Bible could be read in four senses. The first and basic was the literal sense, the second the analogical, the third the moral, and the fourth the prophetical. He saw the dangers of fanciful meanderings but he held that by a careful use of these methods the Bible could be made to yield a harmonious unfolding of God's

purpose; for example, he found an interlocking meaning in the stories of Moses climbing Sinai, David climbing Zion, and Jesus climbing Calvary. /18 Robert Sanderson of Lincoln recognized the complexities in Scripture: "the well is deep and buckets for want of cordage will not reach the bottom", but this weakness is in the reader and not in the Scripture, and the profundities of God could only be imparted through resemblances and riddles which "fell far short of the nature and excellency of the things themselves". /19 Hacket held that "the whole mass of Scripture is of one consent and one harmony", but easy and difficult passages were so mingled that the reader never grasped the whole sense at one reading but there was always fruit to be gathered and expected at further readings unto the end of the world. /20 Hacket also held that the reader has to acclimatize himself to the styles of the different writers if their meaning is to be grasped; there was the stately eloquence of Isaiah, the logical arguments of Paul, the facile exhortations of Peter and the celestial hymns of Luke but "variety is delectable when it does not jar but makes up a unity." /21

Taylor held that the surest way to reach the soundest interpretation was to resort to the great teachers of the Church: "the practice of the Catholic Church is the best commentary..."let the consent of the Catholic Church be your measure." /22 Taylor was sure that this had been well-preserved in the Church of England where "in things simply necessary, God hath preserved us still unbroken." Even in this appeal to a universal consent Taylor realized there were risks and, in arguing against the papal claims that Roman Catholic teaching was based on the unanimous consent of the Fathers, Taylor claimed there was no such consent especially where distinctive papal teaching was concerned. Taylor also held that the literal sense should normally be followed, but it had to be avoided when there were deviations from purity and consistency. In such cases a hidden spiritual meaning had to be sought, though here also restraint had to be used. Origen's hieroglyphic interpretations were often too ingenious and "searching for articles of faith in the by-paths and corners of secret places leads not to faith but to infidelity." /23 Reynolds also issued a warning against "the affectation of

allegories and forced allusions in Origen." /24

Simon Patrick, who had been an exemplary London rector in the time of the great plague and then reluctantly became bishop of Chichester and then of Ely, was troubled by the unpleasant incidents recorded in the OT and especially when attributed to God's own decision. Instead of trying to iron out the unpleasantness by literary ingenuity, Patrick contrasted such incidents with the later proof of God's mercy in Christ. The unfolding story showed that Christians had got a "greater abundance of God's grace than he bestowed in former times." /25 This recognition of the increasing revelation and clearer apprehension of God's grace marked a slight and probably unintentional move from the earlier insistence that God had revealed himself equally in all the Scriptures and that the fullness of the gospel was to be found in all the Bible by those who had eyes to discern it.

At the end of the century, John Williams of Chichester attempted to bring the scientific method to bear upon his study of the Bible. He sought to deal with textual variations and he tried to weave the two Testaments into a historical sequence with an unfolding story but even he did not raise any questions about the weight of the different strands in the fabric or about the literal accuracy of the records. He laid much stress upon the fulfilment of prophetic anticipations and upon the miracles in the lives of OT figures. The historical accounts in the early chapters of Genesis had been derived from the patriarchs and the scribes who had access to the facts, and their records bore the marks of ability, impartiality and care. In themselves there was an obvious consistency and credibility, but where there were parallel pagan sources, though they contained much dross, they had sufficient fine gold to confirm the Scripture which had proved to be "the most exact, faithful and impartial relation the world ever had." /26 Nevertheless, Williams also considered the variety of styles among the biblical writers and he concluded that while God inspired the writers, he left them to express the matter in their own way but agreeing in "the drift and substance" of the revelation. Here indeed was the influence, probably unconscious, of the increasingly critical temper which was to blossom in later time. The "drift and substance" was rather different

from the literal exactitude which Williams professed to discern in the Scriptures. /27 Williams also introduced the note of probability into his examination of the historicity of the biblical stories. He said the Canon was penned by inspired persons and was based on "as much evidence as we have or can have for anything past or distant in time or place from us and which we ourselves have not seen" and he added that a venial error by an original writer or by a subsequent transcriber would not have been a mortal stab at the veracity of Scripture. /28 Tillotson also admitted that the "undoubted certainty" of the Scripture record was "as sure as any matter of fact at such a distance from the time it was done is capable of." /29 Thus there were preachers who were aware of awkward textual and expository problems but they all sought to deal with them within the common belief that God had inspired the writers, that the text and Canon were as God intended them to be, and that there was an inner consistency in the Bible which made every part thereof a mine from which sure guidance for doctrine and morality could be extracted. This remained the prevailing outlook until the startling new scientific, historical and theological investigations and speculations in the nineteenth century compelled readers of the Bible to re-examine and reshape their inherited framework of biblical thought.

Notes

1. C. Hill, The Century of Revolution, 1961

2. J.P. Kenyon, Stuart England, 1978, 34

3. Ibid, 356

4. C. Hill, Milton and the English Revolution, 1977

5. J. Plamenatz (ed.), Leviathan by T. Hobbes: H. Warrender, The Political Philosophy of Hobbes, 1957. Also, see R.B. Knox, "The History of Doctrine in the Seventeenth Century", in A History of Christian Doctrine, ed.by H. Cunliffe-Jones, 1978, 448-449.

6. G.E. Aylmer, "Unbelief in Seventeenth-century England" in D. Pennington and K. Thomas (eds), Puritans and

Revolutionaries, 1978, 22

7. R.B. Knox, "Bishops in the Pulpit in the Seventeenth Century: Continuity amid Change" in R.B. Knox (ed.), Reformation, Conformity and Dissent, 1977.

8. J. Hacket, A Century of Sermons, 1675, 283; see also 989

9. J. Taylor, Works (ed. R. Heber) 1839, VI, 287

10. J. Bramhall, Works, 1845, V, 115-6.

11. J. Cosin, Works, 1843, I, 285

12. R. Brownrig, Forty Sermons, 1661, 108

13. R. Brownrig, Twenty-five Sermons, 1664, 10-11

14. Bramhall, Works, V, 115.

15. J. Tillotson, Works (ed.1743), VII, 2039; also 2215, 2220.

16. E. Reynolds, Works, 1826, V, 153

17. S. Ward, Six Sermons, 1672, 83-5, also 109ff., 129-30, 141.

18. L. Andrewes, Works 1841-54, III, 22

19. R. Sanderson, Twenty-one Sermons, 1681, 128-9; also 156-7.

20. Hacket, op.cit., 283

21. Ibid, 470

22. Taylor, op.cit., VI, 520-1

23. Ibid, 516

24. Reynolds, op.cit., V, 342

25. S. Patrick, A Sermon on December 8, 1678, 31

26. J. Williams, The Boyle Sermons, 1708, 189

27. Ibid, 208-9

28. Ibid, 192, 214

29. Tillotson, op.cit., XI, 4932-6