

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

An Anglican Response

regarding

Scripture and Church

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Our assignment is to examine the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum) of Vatican II, focussing on two inter-related questions: (i) the question of the authoritative character of the Constitution itself; (ii) the question of the authority of Scripture as discussed in the Constitution.

Anglicans inevitably approached the question of the "authority" of promulgations such as those of Vatican II with some ambivalence. The status and criteria pertaining to ecclesiastical and theological pronouncements by the Church or the Churches cannot be easily defined, except in terms of historical precedent, for Anglicanism as a whole. This in itself is a topic for consideration at other levels of ARCIC's third phase of dialogue. It is further complicated by the circumstances that Dei Verbum has been promulgated by an ecclesiastical body claiming "ecumenical" authority for itself yet not accepted on that, or any other officially defined basis, by Anglicanism.

Already the question of the authoritative status of Dei Verbum implies the issues discussed substantively in the text of the Constitution itself, that is, the issues of Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium as regards doctrinal authority.

Anglicans in general will surely welcome the Constitution as an official expression of current Roman Catholic doctrine that does not definitively settle disputed questions but rather provides a basis for constructive ecumenical discussion. To this end, the emphasis of such commentators as Tavard, Ratzinger, and Grillmeier on the process of the Constitution's successive revisions during the course of debate at the Council proves enlightening. For instance, this background material shows that in matters of theological controversy the Constitution was modified, as a result of specific challenge and debate within the Council, so as not to foreclose on continued varieties of theological interpretation of disputed points. Anglicans will want to hear from Roman Catholic spokesmen to what extent, and on what specific issues, this theological openness may be assumed in consideration of the text and in dialogue based on it. Much will therefore hinge on the claims regarding the "authoritative character" of Vatican II pronouncements made by Roman Catholic participants on the Commission. (See Dr. McSorley's paper).

Obviously Anglicans cannot attribute to the documents of even so great a Council as Vatican II the same authoritative status as they attribute to their own formularies (and that in itself is a problematic status) or, above all, the conciliar texts of ancient ecumenical tradition. But at least it may be said

that in all these cases, the authority of ecclesial pronouncements is subject to its relationship to apostolic truth as expressed in scripture. To say this much identifies, but does not solve, a continuing theological tension within Anglicanism itself, and a document such as Dei Verbum will inevitably find itself subject to a rather dialectical critique by Anglicans.

In Chapter 1 of the Constitution, Anglicans will rejoice to discover a theology of Revelation which grounds all subsequent discussion of contentious matters in a fundamental affirmation which, if taken as the controlling perspective for the rest of the text, goes a long way toward resolving many problems and providing a mutually acceptable touchstone for developing a common mind. This fundamental perspective is summed up in #2 and #4.

Through this Revelation (of the works and words of God in history) the profound truth concerning God and human salvation shines for us in Christ, who is at the same time the mediator and the fulness of the whole revelation.

The Christian order, which is the new and final covenant, shall never pass away. No further public revelation is to be expected until the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Affirmations such as these evidently preclude two opposite extremes, in any understanding of Revelation, both of which are contrary to the Anglican mainstream: sheer Biblicism, and the so-called "two-source" theory. While the latter had a prominent place in earlier drafts of the Constitution, of which traces remain here and there throughout the final text, and while the Council never explicitly or definitively anathematized (so to speak) those who hold such a theory, nevertheless it seems that the entire purport of chapter 1 effectively undercuts the theory, so that it need not be a factor for ecumenical study of the Constitution as a whole.

Can this Christology of Revelation therefore serve to overcome the tension that sometimes becomes acute in later sections of the text? For instance, in the chapter on "Transmission of Divine Revelation", Vatican II, in affirming an exalted role for "Holy Tradition", quotes approvingly a passage from the Council of Trent that Anglican apologists have invariably singled out as a notorious example of Roman Catholic overstatement: both Tradition and Scripture, it is insisted, are "to be received and venerated with equal pious affection and reverence" (#9); together Tradition and Scripture are said to "form the one sacred deposit of God's Word which has been entrusted to the Church" (#10); and it is this single sacred deposit, composed of Scripture and Tradition together, on the basis of which "an authentic interpretation of God's Word" is provided "only" by the Church's magisterium.

Taken out of context, assertions such as these may seem inflammatory to heirs of the Reformation. Perhaps the most apparently excessive claim comes at the the very end of chapter 2:

Patently, therefore, Holy Tradition, Holy Scripture, and the Church's magisterium are, according to God's wise design, so interconnected and united that none can stand without the others...

Yet taken in the perspective of chapter 1, and interpreted in its soteriological and pneumatological context, even this passage need not be a stumbling block. The above quotation ends by saying that Scripture, Tradition, and the Church's magisterium

all together effectively contribute, each in its own way, under the motion of the one Holy Spirit, to the salvation of souls.

This hearkens back to the opening paragraph of chapter 2:

God mercifully provided that what he had revealed for the salvation of all nations should be integrally preserved forever and transmitted to all generations. For this purpose, Christ the Lord, in whom the entire revelation of God Most High is brought to completion, commissioned the apostles to preach the Gospel to all ... as the source of all saving truth and moral discipline

The following paragraph elaborates:

... the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a unique way in the inspired books, had to be kept continually until the end of time ... What has been transmitted by the apostles contains all that leads to the sanctification of the life of the People of God and to the growth of faith.

While perhaps adhering more closely than Anglicans would wish to a certain style of scholastic method and to Tridentine terminology, the substance of Dei Verbum is not irreconcilable with the Anglican mainstream understanding of the relationship between Scripture, Tradition, and Doctrine in the Church. That mainstream may be summarized by the juxtaposition of several classic passages:

(i) Articles VI, VIII, XX, Book of Common Prayer

(ii) The following question asked by the Bishop of any candidate for ordination to the priesthood: "Are you persuaded that the holy Scriptures contain sufficiently all doctrine required of necessity for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? And are you determined out of the said Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge, and to teach nothing (as required of necessity to eternal salvation) but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by the Scripture?" (Italics added)

(iii) The following, excerpted from Hooker's Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity I:XIV: "Oftentimes it hath been in very solemn manner disputed, whether all things necessary unto salvation be necessarily set down in the Holy Scriptures or no.... If only those things be necessary, as surely none else are, without the knowledge and practice

whereof it is not the will and pleasure of God to make any ordinary grant of salvation; it may be notwithstanding and oftentimes hath been demanded how the books of Holy Scripture contain in them all necessary things, when of things necessary the very chiefest is to know what books we are to esteem holy albeit Scripture do profess to contain in it all things that are necessary unto salvation; yet the meaning cannot be simply of all things which are necessary, but all things that are necessary in some certain kind or form... known with presupposal of knowledge concerning certain principles whereof it receiveth us already persuaded, and then instructeth us in all the residue that are necessary. In the number of these principles one is the sacred authority of Scripture.... Further, there hath been some doubt likewise, whether containing in Scripture do import express setting down in plain terms, or else comprehending in such sort that by reason we may from thence conclude all things which are necessary. Against the former of these two constructions instance hath sundry ways been given. For our belief in the Trinity, the co-eternity of the Son of God with his Father, the proceeding of the Spirit from the Father and the Son, the duty of baptizing infants: these with such other principal points, the necessity whereof is by none denied, are notwithstanding in Scripture nowhere to be found by express literal mention, only deduced they are out of Scripture by collection. This kind of comprehension in Scripture being therefore received, still there is doubt how far we are to proceed by collection, before the full and complete measure of things necessary be made up.... we do not reject (traditions) only because they are not in the Scripture, but because they are neither in Scripture, nor can otherwise sufficiently by any reason be proved to be of God. That which is of God, and may be evidently proved to be so, we deny not but it hath in its kind, although unwritten, yet the selfsame force and authority with the written laws of God.

It is by way of citing and juxtaposing classic statements such as these that Anglicans invariably, for purposes of ecumenical dialogue, identify their distinctive heritage. These are formularies and expositions which arose in the midst of heated theological and ecclesiastical polemics, and Anglicans today would not claim for them definitive authoritativeness nor that they resolved all issues. Many of them, such as the Articles, are expressed in a manner which, while affirming fundamentals, leaves somewhat open specific questions of interpretation. For instance, Article VI, in speaking of "the sufficiency of the holy scriptures for salvation", defines a principle in light of which Anglicans would undertake any further discussion of Tradition and Doctrine. But like Hooker, Anglicans today would immediately note that Article VI does not itself elucidate the criteria or method for "proving" the authenticity of particular traditions or doctrines. Here interpretative latitude inevitably enters, as it does equally in Dei Verbum, and in the exercise of such latitude Anglicans may indeed be disposed to acknowledge that Dei Verbum itself provides some mutually acceptable guidelines capable of reconciling formerly polarized stances. It is

chapter 6 of the Constitution which contains these guidelines of ecumenical reconciliation:

Like the Christian religion itself, all Church proclamation must feed on, and be ruled by, holy Scripture (#21).... As upon a permanent foundation, sacred theology rests upon the written Word of God in unity with holy Tradition. In this Word it finds strong support and ever new youth as it examines in the light of faith all the truth hidden in the mystery of Christ. The Holy Scriptures contain the Word of God and, on account of their inspiration, they are the Word of God. Accordingly, the study of the sacred text should be, so to speak, the soul of sacred theology (#24).... 'For to ignore the Scriptures is to ignore Christ' (#25).

If passages such as these, taken together with the perspective of chapter 1, can be agreed upon as controlling the ecumenical discussion of the problems in and behind the text of Dei Verbum, as well as the inherited disputes of former generations, then potential lines of genuine convergence become discernible; and the appropriation, interpretation, and realization of the saving power of God in Christ can be seen to characterize the identity and mission of His People, the Church.

Appendix

There are two difficulties in particular which Anglicans tend to raise, over and above the basic question of Scripture's relationship to Tradition and Doctrine in the Church, the first of which may, I believe, be summarily disposed of.

(i) In the transmission and possession of the Word of God, are the whole body of the faithful given their due acknowledgement by Dei Verbum? This question has been raised by most Anglican commentators and it reflects a typical Anglican concern in the face of papal claims. Ratzinger makes these observations about #8 and #10 of chapter 2: It is important that

the progress of the word in the time of the Church is not seen simply as a function of the hierarchy, but is anchored in the whole life of the Church....

(#10) first makes the point that the preservation and active realization of the word is the business of the whole people of God not merely of the hierarchy. The ecclesial nature of the word, on which this idea is based, is therefore not simply a question which concerns the teaching office, but embraces the whole community of the faithful.

Ratzinger then refers to a subsidiary aspect of #10 which meets a corresponding Anglican sensitivity:

The function of the total Church lies... in the idea of perseverat, to which the text gives a central place: in the power of persistence, which recognizes as such the false innovation that is contrary to faith and condemns it, while holding firmly, on the other hand, to the original truth.

Moreover, it is another Vatican text, Lumen Gentium, which itself provides a fuller exposition of such matters in a way that well satisfies Anglican concerns.

(ii) The second major difficulty that many Anglicans, especially those engaged professionally in Biblical study and exegesis, will want to tackle with Roman Catholic spokesmen is that of the "inspiration" of Scripture and, derivatively, hermeneutical method. Chapter 3 expresses a point of view essentially consistent with at least pre-20th century Anglicanism in this matter:

Divine revelation, which is contained and presented in Holy Scripture, was committed to writing under the Holy Spirit's influx (#11)

In Holy Scripture God spoke through men in a human way.... Scripture must be read and interpreted in the same Spirit in whom it was written. To find out correctly the sense of the sacred texts, one must therefore consider with no less care the content and unity of Scripture as a whole, paying attention to the living Tradition of the whole Church and to the analogy of faith.... For all these points concerning scriptural interpretation are ultimately subject to the Church's discernment: she fulfils the divine mandate and task of watching over and interpreting the Word of God (#12). (Cp. Article XX)

The commentary by Alois Grillmeier on chapter 3, and especially on #12 examines and illumines the implications of this section of the Constitution in a manner which the present Anglican finds more than satisfactory. Certainly, his interpretation gives a wide berth to "modern" scholarship in the study of Scripture, but with a significant proviso: "Scripture must ultimately be read in the Church. Even the exegesis of scholars should see itself only as serving the life of the Church." This sentiment would have found widespread acceptance among Biblical critics of an Anglican persuasion until very recently. It seems, however, that "autonomy" from the Church, from doctrine, and even from theology, is increasingly claimed by practitioners of critical historical method. Dei Verbum, in its brief scope, could not be expected to resolve such an issue, and indeed it reflects the debate between "traditionalists" and "liberals" which, in an extreme form, underlay the process of revision of the text during the Council. Nevertheless, in considering "authority" in Scripture and in the Church, those engaged in ecumenical dialogue should be encouraged to tackle this issue directly.

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