

2. As and when opportunity arises, smaller conferences of a more regional nature and limited scope may be convened.
3. We hope to encourage the writing of articles on theological themes, and develop a policy of publication of such articles in association with the *Indian Journal of Theology*.
4. We hope to encourage the production and editing from time to time of books which will contribute to the development of Christian theology in an Indian context.

Membership in the Association is open to all Christian ministers and laymen who have a scholarly concern for the aims of the Association, on payment of an annual subscription of Rs.5 *per annum*. Readers of this note who are interested in joining the Association are invited to communicate with the Secretary-Treasurer, Rev. J. C. Hindley, Serampore College, Serampore, West Bengal.

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The Catholic View of the Historicity of the Gospels

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For nearly a century the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith has been a lively issue. Nineteenth-century scholars, trained in critical methods of historiography, first tried to find in the Gospels 'pure history without faith'; in a later stage of critical study other scholars claimed to find in the same Gospels 'pure faith without history'! Since 1919 the Form-Criticism of the Bultmannians has thrown still greater doubt on the historicity of the Gospels. It is claimed that history about Jesus is irrelevant to faith in Christ.

Scholars in the West do not perhaps realize what a problem they create for the churches in the East by minimizing the historical value of the Gospels. If it is suggested that Christians give up Revelation 'in' history, how does Christianity still differ from non-Christian religions? If the Gospels express mere myths and symbols of human existence or of mere 'eternal truths', unconnected with events, how do we still uphold the

uniqueness of the religion of Jesus Christ over against the mythologies of other religions? And even if we are opposed to such extreme views, the present problems about the historicity of the Gospels demand of us that we readjust our presentation of historic Revelation. It will no more do, in order to support the historicity of the Gospels, merely to show that the Evangelists knew the facts and that they were sincere. On the other hand this much is clear, that though Bultmann and Tillich have given many brilliant insights from which we can profit, yet their historical scepticism seems to be irreconcilable with the genuine vision of the Christian faith. I may here be allowed to leave the discussion about Bultmann and Tillich to more competent speakers. I shall limit myself to putting before you an over-all view of the Catholic position on the historicity of the Gospels.¹ It is in no way my intention to affirm that only Roman Catholic scholars defend this position. Many positions are held in common among a number of Christian scholars.

TWO ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM

The historicity of the Gospels must be approached by Christians from a double point of view: (1) from the point of view of history, and (2) from the point of view of inspiration.

(1) From the point of view of history we must ask whether the Gospels as 'human documents' are reliable; whether they have historic value according to strictly scientific historiography. In other words we must establish the 'human credibility' of the Gospels.

Let us agree that neutral history-writing, without any presuppositions, is impossible. There is no harm in this provided the hidden presuppositions are not blind postulates. If history and faith are both gifts from the same Creator and Redeemer, we must accept that, at least in principle, there can be no cleft between history and faith as there can be no rift between nature and grace.

That the Gospels are historically reliable human documents can be shown on the following lines of investigation, which here can be given only in outline:

(a) The Gospels were written 30-70 years after the events which they describe; in between there was a 'tradition' (paradosis: 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 2:15, 3:6) of oral and partly-written material (Luke 1:1-4). This tradition was formed (not 'created') among the early Christians under the guidance of the Apostles and other eyewitnesses who referred what they

¹ Xavier Leon-Dufour: *Les Evangiles et l'Histoire de Jésus*. Exdit. Seuil, Paris, 1963. Pp. 526. This is the most complete work by a Roman Catholic.

A Dulles: *Apologetics and the Biblical Christ*. Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland, 1963. Pp. 76.

A Dulles: *Jesus as Christ in Thought*. Fordham, 1964. Pp. 359-379.

preached to Jesus as to its first source. The Apostles were definitely not amorphous people but 'appointed witnesses' (Acts 1:8, 2:32, 3:15, 5:32, 8:14-17, 10:39-41). They watched over the spread of the exact gospel which was 'good news' about events (Acts 8:14); they defended the original message (1 Cor. 11:23-35, 15:1-9; Gal. 1:11 ff.). The early Christians had therefore a genuine interest in history; sure enough not as the Greeks and the Romans saw history with exact chronology and topography, nor as moderns see it with all the stages of internal and external development. Nevertheless these Christians saw history and faith as interlocked; they did not put history between brackets, nor did they consider it as irrelevant: they had faith on the basis of events. Not that history gave them the faith, but they saw in the events a sufficiently safe ground for the faith. It is to be admitted that their chronology and topography have been filed off by frequent use in catecheses, but the substantial outline of the career of Jesus remains clearly in evidence (Acts 10:36-41).²

(b) It is true that the literary forms in which the Gospel has come to us resemble the Hellenic, Rabbinic and Qumran forms; but some Form-critics have exaggerated this similarity and they overlooked the fact that the Gospel-forms are very Semitic and differ much in content from the then current forms. These considerations deserve serious attention because it is from the forms and their content that exegetes must find the aim which the sacred writer had in view in his writings.

(c) To be more precise it must be stressed that a gospel (oral or written) is a special genus, which cannot be reduced to any other known literary form. A gospel is neither pure history

O. Vercauysse: What are the Gospels? *Clergy Monthly*, 1962. Pp. 408-418.

V. T. O'Keefe: Towards Understanding the Gospels. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 1959. Pp. 171-189.

B. Rigaux: Historicity of Jesus and Recent Exegesis. *Theology Digest*, Winter, 1961. Pp. 26-32 (from *Revue Biblique*, 1958. Pp. 481-522).

R. H. Fuller: The New Testament in Current Studies. *The Dunwoodie Review*, 1964. Pp. 91-95.

E. Hoskyns and F. N. Davey: *The Riddle of the New Testament*, 1952.

V. Taylor: *Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, 1933.

F. Mussner: *Der historische Jesus und der Christus des Glaubens*. *Bibl. Zeits.*, 1957. Pp. 224-252.

J. Guitton: *Jésus*. Paris, 1956.

A. Bea: *L'Historicité des Évangiles Synoptiques*. La Documentation Catholique, 1964. Pp. 771-788; 825-842 (English Summary, in Herder Correspondence, 1964. Pp. 355-358).

G. Muschalek: *Offenbarung in Geschichte*. *Zeits. Kath. Theologie*, 1964. Pp. 180-196.

A. Voegtle: *Die Historische and Theologische Tragweite der Heutigen Evangelienforschung*. *Ibid.*, 1964. Pp. 385-417.

² C. H. Dodd: *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development*, 1936.

nor pure faith, but it is to announce facts with a religious purpose. Faith and religion influenced the presentation and interpretation of the facts, but the facts were not distorted or falsified: 'Those (signs) here written have been recorded that you may hold the faith that Jesus is the Christ' (John 20:31; cf. Acts 1:1, 2:38, 41, 10:36; Luke 1:1-4, 3:1; Matt. 11:5; 1 Cor. 15:3-5). Faith in the Christ of Easter was not an absolute beginning but a development of the disciples' faith in Jesus even before Easter. Jesus himself connected his resurrection with his passion and death which he foretold (Luke 18:31-34). The pre-paschal events contained already a paschal meaning.

(d) That the Gospel and Gospels have come to us in such variety and with so many differences is historically explained from the fact that they contain the various impressions about Jesus of twelve Apostles and other witnesses. There never was a completely uniform oral or written Gospel. The main task of exegetes is not to harmonize the Gospels, but to come face to face with the Personality of Jesus (I AM). A good portrait can be more faithful to the original than a photo! The early preachers selected, explained, clarified and standardized the Gospel material for simple people, but this does not mean that simple people were unable to see the obvious meaning of obvious facts (Acts 10:37). This does not exclude that the Holy Spirit could constantly help them to see the continuity between the events (Acts 5:32), otherwise we fall back into pure secular historicism.

These and similar fields of investigation, such as manuscript evidence, archaeology and contemporary non-Biblical history, give us a sufficient basis to conclude that the Gospels as human documents are in substance historically reliable. The Gospels received their value only within the tradition of the Church.³ Within this context the meaning of apostle, witness (some 150 times in the New Testament), tradition and Gospel pins down our enquiries to some decisive historical realities. Anyone who takes these words out of their first-century historical context can construct about the Gospels as many theories as he likes.

(2) As Christians, however, we further affirm that the Gospels are absolutely reliable because they are divinely inspired: God cannot help to teach errors.⁴ Inspiration and consequent inerrancy must not be limited to religious matters only. If there is Biblical inspiration everything that the human author teaches is also affirmed by the Holy Spirit (not dictated, nor always revealed). In practice, however, we are sometimes unable

³ Thus the 'Synoptic Problem' also comes to be seen in a new perspective. The problem is not so much to find out to what extent Matthew and Luke used Mark (documentary theory), but rather to what extent all of them depend also on the oral tradition.

⁴ Only the original is inspired.

to show *how* there is no error. Most of the difficulties and differences which we observe in the Gospels are due, under inspiration, to the fact that one Holy Spirit has freely used several (free) human authors according to their different characters. From inspiration it also follows that elements which are pointed out by some Form-critics as 'later or secondary' are not less inspired or theologically not less important than 'earlier or primary' traditions.

AN INSTRUCTION OF THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION ON
THE HISTORICITY OF THE GOSPELS (21st April, 1964)⁵

This Instruction frankly accepts some sound elements of Form-criticism, which have, however, to be distinguished, it is said, from the questionable philosophical and theological principles implicit in the method of some Form-critics. Some such hidden principles seem to be: the incompatibility of faith and historical truth, the impossibility of natural theology, a disdain for Apostolic witness, and an undue emphasis on the 'creative' community of the early Church.

The most important part of the Instruction proceeds to point out THREE STAGES (or levels or contexts) in the gradual formation of the Gospel records:

- (1) The first stage goes back to the very days of Jesus (*Sitz im Leben Jesu*?) who preached, and trained his disciples so that they might carry on his work as witnesses who were with him from the beginning (Mark 3: 13 ff.; Luke 6: 13 ff.; John 15: 26-27; Acts 1: 21-22, 10: 39).
- (2) The second stage is the Apostles' preaching (*Sitz im Leben der Urkirche*?). At first the Apostles preached mainly such facts about Jesus which were deemed necessary in given local circumstances to establish the faith firmly. The Easter or Pentecost experience did not destroy nor distort the Apostles' recollection of the events of the life of Jesus (Acts 2: 22, 32, 36, 3: 13-15, 5: 30-32, 10: 36-41; John 2: 22). The Apostles used various forms of teaching such as catecheses, narratives, controversies, parables, prayers, liturgies, hymns, etc.
- (3) In the third stage we have the redaction of the Evangelists (*Sitz im Evangelium? Redaktionsgeschichte*?). The Evangelists selected certain material, arranged it according to a certain plan (Luke 1: 1-4) and adapted it to the needs of their readers. Thus the final form

⁵ L. Legrand: Bibliography on the Instruction. *Indian Ecclesiastical Studies*, 1964. Pp. 311-319.
Clergy Monthly, August, 1964. Pp. 262-265 (main text of the Instruction).

of the Gospels was much influenced by the redactional and literary activity of the final *composers* who were not mere *compilers* of pre-existing material.

With this Instruction the three stages of the Gospel-formation received in the Roman Church an approval and directive which, however, is not infallible. An Instruction of this kind was needed in order to counteract a certain fundamentalist literalness about the Gospels which showed up even among some of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. The first Schema 'De Fontibus Revelationis' (which was rejected during the First Session) condemned those who questioned the historical truth of the words and deeds of Jesus 'as they are narrated'. The Instruction draws the attention to the encyclical 'Divino Afflante Spiritu' of Pius XII (1943): the Gospels, as well as the Old Testament, must be studied according to their literary forms, historical methods with textual and literary criticism. The Instruction does not take sides in the debate on the Synoptic Problem, nor on the *ipsissima verba Jesu*.

From the pastoral point of view this document from the Biblical Commission advises professors of Holy Scripture to go beyond the critical questions to the very heart of the Gospels where the Word of God is found as a spiritual nourishment for souls. Preachers must not shock unprepared audiences, with insufficiently proved new-fangled theories. Writers of works of popularization must keep abreast of progress in Biblical knowledge but keep clear of that pernicious itch for novelty.

The Instruction is very much open to the present-day problems, thanks greatly to the international membership of the Biblical Commission. On its lists we find scholars like Cardinal Bea, Cardinals Alfrink and Koenig, together with exegetes of the fame of Cerfeaux, Leon-Dufour, Rigaux, Schnackenburg, and many others. This open atmosphere of the Biblical Commission will also facilitate ecumenical collaboration between Christian scholars. It is hoped that this document will be of great help to Christians to reject that old dilemma of looking for a 'Jesus of history' or for a 'Christ of faith'. It must be made clear that there is but one genuine history of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:1).