

ST2B

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Lecture 3 Scripture

Link from Previous Lecture

A sense of ‘immediacy’ became pronounced in Enlightenment philosophies. The philosophical move of René Descartes, among others, asserts the immediacy of ideas (intuition).

We have seen that there is something of a crisis of authority in our modern world resulting from the so-called ‘turn to the self’. Authority is interiorised, and it is so for many reasons (the conflicting authorities of the religious wars must not be forgotten).¹

This certainly should not be something that blights Christian life and thought, especially a Christianity that learns and continually negotiates its identity in and through the creeds. Nevertheless, this ethos does indeed have various Christian versions:

- Experientialism –
 - Liberal experientialism
 - Protestant Pietism

¹ The collapse of authoritative structures in our time is explored by Langdon Gilkey in *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969). Although it was published in 1969 it remains useful identification of the broadly modern *Zeitgeist* as fundamentally secular, meaning “a basic spirit we all share, [that] tends to be subversive of any sort of faith and discourse that might be called authentically Biblical.” [Gilkey, 33] “Little, if any confidence or courage come to modern man from his wider, cosmic environment, where all is blind, relative and transient. In this sense, he is truly ‘on his own,’ an alien set within a context that is indifferent and so irrelevant to his own deepest purposes, and whatever hope and meaning he may have come to him from himself”; “the modern spirit holds that a man must ... live his life in autonomy if that life is to be creative and human.... Thus, the modern spirit is dedicated to the proposition that any external social authority will in the end only crush man’s humanity if his own personal being does not participate fully and voluntarily ... in whatever creative turns his life may take. [57, 59] “The assertion of autonomous freedom and self-direction as the key to human self-fulfillment is subversive of many of the historic forms of religion with their traditional authorities of various sorts stemming from the distant past-and their insistence that man is fulfilled when he patterns himself according to the divine image.” [60] “Whatever our culture’s pious or traditional protestations, man clearly no longer feels himself to be set within any basic order or context in terms of which he understands himself, that is, from which he draws not only his being but also the meanings, standards, and values of his life.” [70]

- Biblical/ecclesial revelation – ‘back-to-basics’ purities²

These, each in their own way, stress the *immediacy* of the presence of the divine. Traditions, and that includes the creeds (and we will see the scriptures too), can and have become frozen – they have become in many ways insertions of an eschatologically pure word into the contingencies of time and space, that themselves can be purely possessed, used and even wielded in assertive fashion. This raises crucial theological questions of the relation of God to time and space, especially a God who is confessed to be incarnationally related to the creature in the presence of Jesus the Christ, of the relation of God to time (in that there is here a frozen moment in time wholly imbued with the purified character of the End-times), and even of the kind of God who inserts/asserts grace in the realm of the creaturely in such fashion.³

I have suggested ways of problematising these (although critiquing them, however, does not necessarily entail a denial of the *directness* of the Self-mediation of God – i.e., that it is indeed confessable that it is *God* who comes through the medium):

- Through observing patterns of actual learning⁴
- Through theological claims to the importance of meditation

² N.T. Wright: “we imagine that we are ‘reading the text, straight’, and that if somebody disagrees with us it must be because they, unlike we ourselves, are secretly using ‘presuppositions’ of this or that sort. This is simply naïve, and actually astonishingly arrogant and dangerous. ... [This] fuels the second point, which is that evangelicals often use the phrase ‘authority of scripture’ when they *mean* the authority of evangelical, or Protestant, theology, since the assumption is made that we (evangelicals, or Protestants) are the ones who know and believe what the Bible is saying.” [N.T. Wright, ‘How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?’, *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991), 7-32, available http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm, accessed 18-01-07]

³ The pressure coming from this toward an intensive anti-intellectualism among modern forms of Christianity has been historically perceptible (‘thinking’ would require the testing of experience, the admission of risk, and the contingency of theological confession). This generally takes the form of a kind of ‘know-nothing’ Christianity that actually claims rather a lot, but without any honesty about its own presuppositions, and sets up the straw man of any opposition being on a terrible ‘slippery slope’ to unbelief. Of course, this form of the shaping of belief possesses immense practical effects – it is unable to assess competing beliefs or claims to experience; becomes dishonest about the way that we shape our experience [the earliest church seems to have interpreted Jesus’ call to mission through an anti-Gentile lens, until Peter and Paul’s visions]; or if there is content to the claim to experience, then it is *asserted*.

⁴ In practice, however pure Descartes, for example, felt his intuitions to be (self, God, and so on) he was far from providing descriptions of these that were in practice free from a *history of usage*, and therefore a sociality of knowing. Put simply, he is largely deluded about, and chooses to ignore questions raised by, the way we come to learn.

These questions and theological concerns arise again when a second, and indeed theologically more primary, confession of divine mediation is considered – the place and nature of the bible as scripture.

When we studied the Christian use of the creeds we saw something of a twofold dialectic operating: the creeds grow out of scripture (scripture \rightarrow creeds), as distillations of who the God of the scriptures is; but in turn they help the reading of scriptures by providing ways of identifying the God of the scriptural witness (scripture \leftarrow creeds). In other words, just as much as the identity of ‘God’ is derived from the scriptures, the God one believes in (the meaning one gives to the word ‘God’) affects the way one reads the scriptural texts. Reading the scriptures does not provide a culturally pure ‘God’ (indeed, there are questions of the enculturation of the very authors of the scriptural texts themselves). A problematic reading of the scriptures and a problematic theology (*theologia*) go hand in hand to a significant degree. That entails that the relation between tradition and scripture is not

- Scripture *and* tradition (where the ‘and’ refers to the relation of equals)
- Scripture *or* tradition (as if they are in conflict with one another)

This week we turn our attention to questions over the theology of scripture. What does it mean to confess God through those texts Christians call the scriptures? What theological assumptions do certain construals of the nature of scripture make?