

THE CHANGING VIEW OF TRADITION IN THE CHURCH OF ROME

Tradition I

Until AD300 there was, in the Church, a general consensus regarding authority. The New Testament was the inspired record of the “apostles’ doctrine”. Together with the “older Scriptures”, it was the record of revelation and the authoritative norm for doctrine.

Irenæus (c130-200) adopted the term *regula fidei* (Rule of Faith) or *regula veritatis* (Rule of Truth) to refer to the content of the profession of faith which every catechumen was asked to recite from memory prior to baptism. It was a summary of faith taught by the apostles and committed to their disciples. There was, therefore, no conflict between the summary and the teaching of Scripture itself. F.F. Bruce has written:

When the summary of the apostolic tradition is called the rule of faith or the rule of truth, the implication is that this is the church’s norm, the standard by which everything must be judged that presents itself for Christian faith or claims to be Christian doctrine, the criterion for the recognition of truth and exposure of error. If at times it is formally distinguished from Scripture in the sense that it is recognized as the interpretation of Scripture, at other times it is materially identical with Scripture in the sense that it sums up what Scripture says. Plainly what was written down by the apostles in their letters and what was delivered by them orally to their disciples and handed down in the church’s tradition must be one and the same body of teaching.¹

This concept of the *regula fidei* remained the crucial weapon in the Church’s arsenal against Gnosticism and other early heresies.

The Scriptures themselves were interpreted within the context of the *regula fidei*. If taken out of its apostolic context, the Scriptures could be mishandled. However, neither the Church nor the *regula fidei* were considered second sources of revelation or authorities on a par with Scripture.

The Church was the interpreter and guardian of God’s Word and the *regula fidei* was a summary of the apostolic proclamation and the interpretative context of God’s Word. But only Scripture itself *was* the Word of God.

This position has been called “Tradition I” by Heiko Oberman.² Thus although the Scriptures must be interpreted by the Church and in the Church according to the rule of faith, the Scriptures are the sole source of authoritative revelation (= Tradition I).

In the words of Eastern Orthodox scholar, Georges Florovsky, in the early Church, exegesis was “the main, and probably the only, theological method, and the authority of the Scriptures was sovereign and supreme.”³ But the *regula fidei* was the necessary context for the correct interpretation of that authoritative Scripture.⁴ [*Ibid.*]

Tradition II

In the period 300-400 the first hints of a two-source concept of tradition, began to appear. This allows for extra-Biblical revelation considered as authoritative as Scripture itself. The notion of an extra-Scriptural source of revelation equally as authoritative as Scripture was called by Oberman “Tradition II”.

This new position is possibly suggested in the writings of Basil and Augustine, although it is uncertain that either of these men actually intended to promote such an idea. And although such a view was foreign to the earliest of the Church fathers, its suggestion in Augustine’s writings guaranteed it a place in Medieval Church thought.

Despite this, during most of the Medieval period, the Early Church consensus continued, with most theologians adhering to Tradition I. But in the period 1100-1200, the beginnings of a real movement toward a two-source theory can be discerned in the writings of the canon lawyers. This shift reached a turning-point in the work of William of Ockham in the period 1300-1350. He was one of the first, if not *the* first, Medieval theologian explicitly and unambiguously to embrace a two-source theory of revelation.

From this time, the two concepts (Tradition I and Tradition II) developed in parallel.

The Reformation

It is important to understand that the “Magisterial Reformers” (Martin Luther and Jean Cauvin) did not formulate a novel doctrine of Scripture and ecclesiastical authority. Like the fathers before them, they affirmed Scripture as being the sole source of authoritative revelation and denied the existence of equally authoritative extra-Scriptural revelation.

The Reformer’s complaint was essentially that the Roman church had completely deviated from the apostolic life and doctrine and, perhaps even more serious, had actually insulated itself theologically against the possibility of ever being corrected by submission to a higher standard of truth. Rome had come to see herself as infallible and so had become autonomous.

The apparent novelty of Tradition I (as presented by the Reformers) was a consequence of its contrast to the currently accepted doctrine and practice of the Roman church of that day. After all, Tradition I had been the sole position for the first three centuries of the Church and had remained predominate for the following 1000 years.

Until the time of the Reformation, *both* Tradition I and the newer Tradition II were found within the Western church. But when (in response to ecclesiastical tyranny and apostasy) theologians like Luther and Cauvin asserted Tradition I under the banner *sola Scriptura*, whilst maintaining simultaneously that the authoritative Scripture must be interpreted in and by the Church within the interpretative rule of faith, Rome reacted by defending Tradition II. Indeed, it went as far as to make Tradition II its official and only position at the Council of Trent (1545-63) on April 8, 1546 for the first time by using these words: “in the written books and in the unwritten traditions”.

After Trent the two-source view (Tradition II) was preserved for several centuries by means of the Roman Catechism and through the influence of Peter Canisius and Robert Bellarmine.

This view is reflected in the Vatican II document *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum* promulgated in 1965:

9. Hence there exists a close connection and communication between *sacred tradition* and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently *it is not from Sacred Scripture alone* that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been

revealed. Therefore *both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.*(6)

10. *Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers (see Acts 2, 42, Greek text), so that holding to, practicing and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort.* (7)

But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, (8) has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, (9) whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.

It is clear, therefore, that *sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church*, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.⁵

Tradition III

In more recent years, however, Rome's position has begun to develop into a Tradition III view in which the real source of revelation is neither Scripture nor tradition, but instead the living Magisterium, or teaching body, of the Roman church. According to this view, whatever Rome now says *is* the apostolic faith. Scripture and tradition then came to be interpreted by Rome to support whatever Rome teaches.

In practice this means that whatever the Roman church teaches now *is* tradition by very definition. This is what Oberman calls "Tradition III". It presently coexists in Roman Catholicism church alongside Tradition II.

The two notions of living development and binding authority of the teaching office of the Church to which Cardinal Newman and systematic theologian Jos. Scheeben (d. 1888) contributed in the same century, together with the declaration of the dogmas (1854) of the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, of (1870) the definition of papal infallibility and of (1950) the pronouncement of the bodily assumption of the immaculate Virgin, has led in our time to a reconsideration of the relation of the *Magisterium* as active tradition to the so-called sources of Revelation as the objective tradition. Notwithstanding appearances the debate on the relation of Scripture and extra-biblical tradition has lost some of its former urgency. A Tradition III concept is in the process of being developed by those who tend to find in the teaching office of the Church the one and only source for revelation. Scripture and tradition are then not much more than historical monuments of the past.⁵

This means that Rome is now moving toward a one-source concept of tradition – but the source in question is different from the one-source confessed by the apostolic Church. Rather than Scripture (and/or tradition), the single source of revelation is the present Roman Magisterium. Oberman continued:

Humanii generis declared in 1950 that it is the task of theology to show in what way a doctrine defined by the Church is contained in the sources of faith: Scripture and tradition. The task of the doctor, be he biblical scholar or Church historian, is to read the latest doctrinal decisions back into his sources. From the vantage point of medieval history, we may say that what first was the vital teaching office of the Doctor of

Scripture, standing together with the Bishop as the custodian of the deposit of faith, has now been transformed into the office of the Apologete of the Teaching Office of the Church; the Doctor has become the *ancilla papae*!⁶

– Mike Taylor

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ENDNOTES:

1. BRUCE, F.F. *Tradition: Old and New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), pp.117-118.
2. OBERMAN, Heiko A. *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), *passim*.
3. FLOROVSKY, Georges. *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox view*. The Collected Works, Vol.I. Ed. Richard S. Haugh (Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), p.75.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum solemnly promulgated by his holiness Pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965, Chapter II, §§9-10 – my emphasis.*
6. OBERMAN, Heiko A. *The Dawn of the Reformation* (*op. cit.*), pp.289-290.
7. *Ibid.*, pp.292-293.

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