
Scripture and Tradition

Hywel Jones

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1963 was an important year in ecumenical discussion of the nature and status of the Bible. In July of that year, the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, one of a series of conferences organised by the World Council of Churches (WCC), was held in Montreal. One of the subjects studied there was 'Scripture, Tradition and Traditions'.¹

This was not the first occasion for an ecumenical gathering to consider the Bible. Prior to Montreal, a number of conferences had been held in the years immediately following the Second World War, and the work put into these culminated in a conference which was held at Wadham College, Oxford in 1949. A statement was issued by this meeting entitled 'Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of the Bible'.² It was the fruit of discussions about how to approach certain social and political questions and is fairly brief and general in character. No Roman Catholics contributed to it, though the Orthodox Churches were represented. Following Montreal, a number of study groups and plenary Faith and Order Conferences met to do further work on aspects of the statement which it had produced. These were held at Bristol in 1957, at Louvain in 1971 and at Bangalore in 1978. They concentrated on hermeneutics, authority and the relation between the Old and New Testaments respectively.

Though it was one conference among others, Montreal was a watershed for ecumenical study of the Bible, and it was so in two major respects. On the one hand, a **breakthrough** was effected there and, on the other, a decisive **breach**. We will consider each of these in turn.

THE BREAKTHROUGH

As all the churches in the WCC are doctrinally related to the Bible in some way or other, an approach to it which is common to all participants in the ecumenical venture is essential. The Bible is therefore a vital matter not only for evangelicalism but also for ecumenism, though not in the same way, as we shall see. Lukas Vischer writes, 'to form a relationship of effective common witness, it is essential that the churches reach a common understanding of the authority and use of the Bible in the life and witness of the church'.³

Two things which happened at Montreal helped to bring about the

breakthrough which we are seeking to describe. First, there were Roman Catholics present. While they had only taken up observer status unlike the Orthodox who were full members of the Council, they could not have been more active. As a result, it was possible for the first time to perceive the ecumenical problem in all its aspects. Secondly, the Conference gave attention to one of the issues which had created the basic divide in the Reformation between the Roman Catholics on the one hand and Protestants on the other. This was the relationship between Scripture and Tradition. Did God reveal Himself and His will sufficiently and supremely in Holy Scripture alone or by the traditions of the apostles handed down orally in the church as well? If this deadlock could be eased and freed, then progress could be achieved not only on the Scripture-Tradition issue, but on every other theological issue as well.

Given a subject with such a degree of controversy attached to it, one might think that with only the Wadham Statement behind it, the delegates were taking an exceedingly bold step. However, this was not the case. Much had happened between 1949 and 1962/3 with regard to the Scripture-Tradition question on both sides of the Reformation divide, and so the risk factor involved in tackling the subject head on was minimal. Apart from the effect generated by the ecumenical phenomenon and experience, two events need to be noted in this change.

The first event was The Third World Faith and Order Conference held in 1952 at Lund in Sweden. This demonstrated what had been happening in Protestantism with regard to our subject. Secondly, there was another gathering, a council, not a conference, namely, the unexpected and famed **Second Vatican Council** which met in the autumn of 1962. This gave an indication of what was happening in Roman Catholicism on the same matter. Though barely six months elapsed between the Council and the Montreal Conference, theologians were well aware of each other's views prior to those gatherings. A new route was opened up to study the relationship between Scripture-Tradition. Indeed, this was evidently the case with Vatican II.

The Lund Conference, with 'Schism, Heresy and Apostasy' as its subject, gave to many an experience of a theological impasse, because the representatives of each church viewed these matters from the perspective of their own denominational history. This was described in a British journal of the time under the caption, 'The Ecumenical Dead-End Kids'.⁴ As a result, a resolution was passed to set up a theological commission with the task of exploring more deeply 'the resources for further ecumenical discussion to be found in that common history which we have as Christians'.⁵

When this approved motion reached the Working Committee in 1953, it was decided to appoint an interim committee:

'to study the problem of tradition in all its biblical and historical aspects, paying particular attention to the problem as it had been put before us in recent literature in order to bring out the importance and need for such a study for ecumenical understanding'.⁶

This committee was set up in two sections, one in North America and the other

in Europe. They approached this theme in differing but complementary ways. The American group viewed the subject from a historical standpoint; the Europeans treated it theologically. Their reports came before the Montreal Conference.

Clearly, enough had been said and done to encourage Montreal to tackle the subject of Scripture and Tradition from a standpoint other than that of *Sola Scriptura*, ie, Scripture versus Tradition.

Coupled, with this, of course was the awareness of what had happened at the opening session of the Second Vatican Council where it seemed that Scripture was being spoken of favourably vis à vis Tradition. The Montreal Report could state, 'We are aware that in Roman Catholic theology the concept of Tradition is undergoing serious reconsideration'.⁷

Prior to Montreal, Father Yves M Congar, the author of a massive work entitled *TRADITION AND TRADITIONS*,⁸ had submitted a comment on the reports of the two working groups which were to be tabled at the Conference. In that comment he had referred to the writings of G H Tavad (who was at Montreal) and Karl Rahner on the subject of Tradition. These progressive Roman Catholic theologians were very influential in the run-up to Vatican II and afterwards.

What happened at the opening session of Vatican II⁹ must now be briefly summarised. Of the sixteen documents which emerged from the Council, only two are dignified with the title *DOGMATIC CONSTITUTION*. These are entitled *LUMEN GENTIUM* (The Light of the Nations) and *DEI VERBUM* (The Word of God) and they relate to the church and to revelation respectively. They are most important promulgations and the distinctive theology of Vatican II is to be found in them.

DEI VERBUM (with which we are concerned) is five times shorter than *LUMEN GENTIUM*, and yet it took one more year for it to be finalised. This was not due to the fact that it had not been discussed during the second session of the Council, but rather because the statement that was initially tabled on the Scripture-Tradition issue had run into such difficulty that the whole subject had to be reinvestigated. This prepared statement, entitled *DE FONTIBUS REVELATIONIS* (Concerning the Sources of Revelation) was bitterly opposed when it came before the Council. Cardinal Liénart expressed his opposition in the following words:

'This schema (ie, the prepared document) does not please me. It is not adequate to the matter it purports to deal with, namely, Scripture and Tradition. There are not and never have been two sources of revelation. The Word of God is the unique source of revelation. This schema is a cold and scholastic formula, while revelation is a supreme gift of God — God speaking directly to us. We should be thinking more along the lines of our separated brothers who have such a love and veneration for the Word of God. Our duty now is to cultivate the faith of our people and cease to condemn'.¹⁰

This protest and approach to the question of Scripture-Tradition was so

strongly supported in the Council that it became necessary for the Pope to intervene. He decided to withdraw the offending schema and appointed a special commission to revise it. Progressive theologians were appointed to this working group and the result was DEI VERBUM. With this and Lund behind it, the Montreal Conference could take up the Scripture-Tradition question without fear of being stabbed in the back. Commenting on both DEI VERBUM and the Montreal Statement, Flesseman - van Leer writes: 'Both statements deal with identical or similar problems; both are official statements and can therefore be considered as giving a general overall picture of the respective positions. One cannot expect bold and new theological insights in documents of this kind, but exactly for that reason they are a gauge for present day thinking'.¹¹

Dei Verbum

DEI VERBUM consists of a short preface and twenty-six articles, arranged in six chapters. These concern Revelation (ch 1), its Transmission (ch 2), Scripture — its Inspiration and Interpretation (chs 3-5) and Scripture in the Life of the Church (ch 6). What we must do is to examine this statement to see if it represents a real shift from the position promulgated at the Council of Trent in 1546,¹² and, if so, whether this was a move towards the theology of the Reformation on the Scripture-Tradition question. We must look then at what it says about revelation, tradition and scripture. Before we do this, however, there is one detailed but important matter which we must consider.

It is well known that DEI VERBUM encouraged personal and private reading of the Scriptures by the faithful, and the setting up of societies for their translation and distribution even jointly with 'separated brethren'. This has come to be regarded as positive proof not only of a positive change in Rome, but also of a move in a Protestant direction. But it needs to be borne in mind that it is still the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church which alone has the grace and right to interpret those Scriptures authentically. This is classic Roman Catholicism and is referred to in the very chapter of DEI VERBUM (ch 6) where such reading and translation of the Scriptures are encouraged. Article 25 declares:

'It belongs to the bishops, "among whom the apostolic doctrine resides", to prepare the faithful in their care, at the right time, to make proper use of the divine books, especially of those of the New Covenant and first of all the Gospels. This should be done through translations of the sacred texts, to which necessary explanations that should be truly sufficient are attached'.¹³

We must now consider what DEI VERBUM has to say about revelation, tradition and Scripture.

Revelation

DEI VERBUM is the most important official statement ever issued by the Roman Catholic church on this crucial subject, which lies not only at the centre of contemporary theological discussion but also of Christianity itself.

The first paragraph ¹⁴ contains the constitutive elements of the doctrine which is unfolded in the articles which follow it and the following six emphases appear in this statement:

1. Revelation is set in a Trinitarian framework. Each Person of the Trinity is seen at work either in its disclosure or in its reception.
2. Revelation depends upon the sovereign act of God, and it is effected because sovereignty is clothed with goodness, wisdom and abundant love.
3. Revelation is both based upon and focussed in the Person of Christ, 'the Word made flesh', through whom all revelation comes and in whom it reaches its acme.
4. The necessity of revelation is alluded to in the description of God as 'invisible', its progressive character indicated in the words 'the history of salvation' and its finality implied in what is said about Christ being its 'fulness'.
5. The content of revelation is described in terms of 'God and His saving purpose, and this is accomplished by deeds and words in close and specified relationship to each other'.
6. The purpose of revelation is presented as the bringing of man into fellowship with and likeness to God.

Apart from minor criticisms... all these statements are quite unexceptionable as a summary of revelation. To leave the matter here, however, would be incredibly naive. Every credal or confessional statement... is historically conditioned. It bears the marks of the circumstances in which it was formulated, the conflicts which necessitated it, and the thinking of those who drew it up and their purpose in doing so. It is mainly points 5 and 6 above which are signposts to the situation in which this statement on divine revelation is set.

The statements of people actually involved in the formulation of *DEI VERBUM* are of great help here. Two such are Bishop B C Butler and Joseph Ratzinger. They were appointed by Pope John's elected commission to serve on a subcommission. We shall make use of their comments.

Bishop Butler has a chapter entitled 'Revelation and Inspiration' in his valuable book *THE THEOLOGY OF VATICAN II*.¹⁵ With regard to *DEI VERBUM*'s treatment of revelation, he comments that it, 'does not begin, as a manual of dogmatic theology might, with a scholastic definition of the meaning of "divine revelation" considered as a term of general connotation'.¹⁶

The emphasis in the preface is unambiguously placed on the interpersonal character of revelation — what Butler, echoing Buber's terminology, calls the 'Thou-and-I-relationship'. Ratzinger makes the identical point in his commentary on this chapter in *COMMENTARY ON THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II*.¹⁷ There he refers to the work of René Latourelle who has shown with painstaking detail the correspondence between Vatican I (held in 1870; it issued the decree on papal infallibility) and II on this matter. Ratzinger also points out that Latourelle has mentioned the differences between the two Councils. These differences show how thinking on the subject of revelation

has undergone a change in the intervening ninety years, one more minor than the other but neither without real significance demonstrate this. First, Vatican I attributes revelation to 'goodness and wisdom'; Vatican II to 'His goodness and wisdom'. This emphasises the personal element. Secondly, Vatican I speaks of the content of revelation as 'the eternal decree of His will'; Vatican II changes this to the 'Sacramentum of His will'. Ratzinger's comment on this latter change is worth noting:

'Instead of the legalistic view that sees revelation largely as the issuing of divine decrees, we have a sacramental view, which sees law and grace, word and deed, message and sign, the person and his utterance within the one comprehensive unity of the mystery'.¹⁸

A further contrast concerns the position which the knowledge of God, obtained by the exercise of man's reason, occupies in the two Council's definitions. In Vatican I it comes at the beginning; in Vatican II at the end. One cannot escape the feeling that it has been appended rather summarily in Vatican II, and not integrated with what precedes it. But the fact that it *is* included is important. For all the emphasis on divine revelation, natural theology is not repudiated. There are still two ways to know God.

The leading characteristic, then, of this 'new' emphasis is its insistence that divine revelation is *from* a Person, *of* a Person, *to* a person, and that it is the means by which those two persons come together.

Bishop Butler refers to Tanqueray's scholastic definition of revelation, namely, that revelation is 'the manifestation of some truth made to us by God through a supernatural illumination of our mind'.¹⁹ He then proceeds to characterise two views pictorially as follows:

'We are not in the schoolroom where a divine philosopher, himself unseen, dictates abstract ideas to pupils of high intelligence. We seem rather to be in the original paradise, where an infinitely loving God calls to us, accepts us as his friends, woos us to his friendship'.²⁰

Bishop Butler finds evidence in *DEI VERBUM* of tension between these two views of revelation. He writes, 'The first chapter of *DE DIVINA REVELATIO* shows signs of a conflict between a conceptualist and a more biblical notion of revelation'.²¹ As the ground on which this verdict is based, he refers to the latent ambiguity in the word *revelation* for it can mean 'either the act of revealing or the truths revealed'.²² The Constitution does use it in both ways.

In *DEI VERBUM*, however, the weight of emphasis falls on the personalist and not the propositional element. This harmonises also with Protestant theologising about the nature of revelation.

Tradition

The opening words of the second chapter, called The Transmission of Divine Revelation, of *DEI VERBUM* declare, 'In His gracious goodness, God has seen to it that what He had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations'. The question which this statement evokes is: How does this come about? The

answer of this chapter — and it is the classic answer of Roman Catholicism — is that it is *not only* by Scripture that this is effected, but also by Tradition, and so the chapter draws out the relevance of both for the process of transmission of revelation.

One sentence in this chapter supplies a convenient framework for the treatment of our subject. It is:

‘Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing from the same divine well spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and tend and move towards the same goal’.

This sentence presents us with three elements regarding Tradition, viz, its source, unity and purpose.

1 The Source of Tradition and Scripture

Article 7 deals with this and describes the source of both Tradition and Scripture as being *from God through Christ and by the Holy Spirit*.

Christ the Lord is the One ‘in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion’ and also the One who initiates the process by which that revelation which He was and proclaimed is transmitted. He commissioned apostles ‘to preach to all men that gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching’ and they carried out this charge ‘by their oral preaching, by example, and by ordinances’. Some of the apostles ‘committed the message of salvation to writing’, as did others who are termed ‘apostolic men’, but both groups did so ‘under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit’. This is the first stage in the process of the transmission of revelation.

Note, however, that the view of Tradition presented here is already larger in content than the contents of Scripture. The fulfilment of the Lord’s commission is not linked exclusively with the inspiration of the message of salvation. It also includes, and this before the other, the handing on by the apostles not only ‘what they had received from the lips of Christ’ but ‘from living with Him, and from what He did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit’. This is sacred Tradition — oral tradition — which is extra to written Scripture.

The second stage concerns the bishops. The Constitution does... claim that the apostles handed over ‘their own teaching role’ to them. This was done ‘to keep the gospel forever whole and alive within the church’. We are left then with a body of material, some written and unwritten, which in its entirety can be traced backwards from the bishops, a continuing order in the church, through the apostles, to God in Christ. This puts extra-scriptural material in the same category as Scripture and, therefore, on the same basis of authority.

2 The Unity of Tradition and Scripture

The presence of the words ‘in some fashion’ in the quotation we are analysing prevents a *total* identification between Scripture and Tradition, but nevertheless it asserts that they do coalesce. They are, therefore, not to be totally separated. That they do merge is clear from the following words,

'Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God which is committed to the church'.²³ But how can Tradition be called 'the Word of God'? The answer includes three elements, namely, the original content, the development and the use of Tradition.

a) The Original Content of Tradition

Article 8 puts forward a case based on 2 Thessalonians 2:15, where Paul speaks of the traditions he had taught 'by word or our epistle'. In the light of this text, the Article claims that what the apostles gained from Christ, in ways that were open to them alone, was of the same character, whether it was subsequently committed to writing in Scripture or passed on orally. Therefore, *both* can rightly be termed 'the Word of God'.

b) The Continuing Development of Tradition

We are told that 'the church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes'. There is a link here between the teaching, life and worship of the church subsequent to the New Testament and the preaching, example and ordinances of the apostles as recorded in the New Testament. Now to admit that what the apostles taught orally was *more* than what they set down in Scripture is obvious and incontestable; but to assert that there is identity and harmony between that oral teaching and what the church subsequently teaches is quite another matter. This is what is claimed above and it is further explained, 'This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down'.

The assertion here is that this growing understanding is the result of the activity of the Holy Spirit. *This is a massive claim.* Bishop Butler makes the point that this paragraph in Article 8 is 'practically a précis of Newman's theory of the development of doctrine'. The essence of this assertion is that a developing tradition is the Word of God, not only because it is in harmony with apostolic teaching, but also because it is an unfolding of it. It is in this way that the dogmas of papal infallibility and the perpetual virginity and bodily assumption of Mary are substantiated. It is this line of reasoning which makes us question the validity of this theology of Tradition.

c) The Use of Tradition

That Sacred Tradition is used in much the same way as Sacred Scripture, appears in the following statement from Article 8:

'This happens (ie development and growth) through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts, through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth... The words of the Holy Fathers witness to the living presence of this tradition, whose wealth is poured into the practice and life of the believing and praying church... 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 devotion and reverence .

3 The Purpose of Tradition and Scripture

Their goal is to perfect the church; by them 'the church constantly moves forward toward the fulness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her'.²⁴ This points in the direction of both being *necessary* for the life of the church which must regard them both as God's self-disclosure.

We are now in a position to consider the view of tradition as put forward in this document. The use of the word 'Tradition' in the singular and in its capitalised form represents a decided shift from the position of Trent and Vatican I on this subject. It may be compared with what we have noted in relation to revelation where a living reality is presented rather than expressed propositions. In this way, *tradita* (things handed down) can be likened to *revelata* (things revealed), and *traditio* (tradition) to *revelatio* (revelation).

While the concept of Vatican II may be termed abstract, it should not be thought of as theoretical. It is a rather dynamic concept; it is a Spirit-superintended process which links the present with the past on one hand and, as it has not yet reached its climax, with the future on the other. Such a concept diverts attention from the particular traditions themselves. It also makes it easier to believe in their continuity with the past, even though this cannot be demonstrated from the historical or literary point of view. Tradition is an all-embracing concept, a developing and enveloping, unfolding and enfolding reality. This is reflected in the way in which Tradition is always placed before Scripture in this chapter of DEI VERBUM. Indeed, it is said that by Tradition, 'the Church's full canon of the sacred books is known, and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and increasingly made active in her'.

Tradition is the dominant idea in the transmission of revelation, and Scripture is but a part of it. This is reinforced by the claim in Article 12 that in interpreting Scripture, account must be taken of 'the living tradition of the whole church'. Bishop Butler expresses the point as follows:

'In fact, then, Sacred Tradition should not be distinguished from Scripture as though they were two distinct realities, but only as a whole is distinguishable from one of its constituents. The relevant theological question is not: "what does tradition give us that Scripture does not contain?", but "what is the function of Scripture within the total fact of tradition"'.²⁵

In his book *HOLY WRIT OR HOLY CHURCH*,²⁶ G H Tvard maintains that this was the church's view on this subject prior to the fourteenth century. However, it may be noted that this position in no way protects itself against the Protestant charge that the traditions which have resulted from the process of transmission have distorted the original deposit of apostolic teaching, whether these found expression in Scripture or not. Ratzinger admits this, and instances the opposition of Oscar Cullmann and J K S Reid on this score. This becomes particularly acute in the face of the following claim made for the magisterium:

‘The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ’.²⁷

From Tradition and Scripture as God’s revelation, we are brought to the church as its embodiment and interpreter.

Scripture

In chapters 3-5 of *DEI VERBUM* the Bible itself is the focus of attention. The fourth and fifth chapters are concerned with the Old and New Testaments respectively, and the divine origin and inspiration of each is declared. We will concentrate on the third chapter because it is here, under the heading of ‘The Divine Inspiration and Interpretation of Sacred Scripture’, that we face the question of ‘whether the Catholic Church is committed to a kind of biblical fundamentalism’.²⁸

The Roman Catholic Church has always upheld the full infallibility of Holy Scripture. Neither of the two great divisions within Christendom occurred over this doctrine. It was held by the Council of Trent and by Vatican I; Vatican II in Article II declares that

‘the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts’ were ‘written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit’ and therefore ‘have God for their Author... It follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation’.

When the modernist movement was gaining momentum within the RC Church at the beginning of this century, Popes Leo XIII then Pius X banned, then attempted in various ways to root out, modernism both from their colleges and dioceses climaxing in the imposition of an anti-modernist oath on all clerics from 1910. Thus the movement was practically extinguished.²⁹

However, this crisis was never really resolved, and even in 1961 professors at the Biblical Institute in Rome were banned. Pius XII’s decree, generally referred to as the *Magna Carta* of catholic biblical scholarship, maintains the traditional position of the magisterium while allowing greater freedom to biblical scholars. The same kind of tension is found in *DEI VERBUM*. On the one hand, the inspiration of Scripture is endorsed, but on the other, the humanness of the Scriptures is recognised, and the consequent need for the ‘interpreter to investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture’.

This is taken as far as a limitation of inerrancy. ‘The books of Scripture’ teach ‘without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation’ but no more. Only what is necessary to salvation is what is set down inerrantly in Scripture. This loophole enables the RC biblical scholar to operate in areas which were previously forbidden and to work in

conjunction with Protestant biblical scholars — but always within the limits of Roman Catholic dogma, as the case of Hans Küng makes clear. Article 19 of DEI VERBUM endorses the view which sees the Gospels as documents composed in the light of the post-Easter faith of the church, but maintains that their contents are 'true and sincere'. According to B C Butler, DEI VERBUM exhibits an attempt 'to steer a course between the Scylla of radicalism and the Charybdis of Fundamentalism'.³⁰

DEI VERBUM is a statement which does strike out into a new world and in a new spirit. But it does this while retaining its links with classical Roman Catholic dogma as expressed in Trent and Vatican I. The change visible in Vatican II is not superficial, but neither is it substantial. Flesseman-van Leer writes:

'As long as that possibility (ie that Tradition includes truths not in Scripture) has to be kept open, the Tridentine concept of Tradition and its quantitative thinking is not really overcome; no more is it possible to bind Tradition in a strict way to Scripture, let alone allow it to stand under its judgement. Consequently, the assertion that the ultimate source of faith is the Word of God, deposited in the togetherness of Tradition and Scripture does not sound convincing, for ultimately Scripture is dispensable'.³¹

For all that DEI VERBUM says about the Word of God, it is still the church which is supreme!

We turn now to the Montreal Statement to see how Scripture and Tradition are dealt with there.

The Montreal Statement

This is set out in 39 paragraphs, numbered 38-76, and consists of an introduction, three main sections and an appendix. Because of lack of conference time, only the first of the main sections was fully discussed and supported. The other two were generally recommended for study. The three main sections are entitled Scripture, Tradition and Traditions; The Unity of Tradition and the Diversity of Traditions; The Christian Tradition and Cultural Diversity.

In terms of length, the treatment of Scripture consists of only seven sentences which comprise paragraph 42 and it is nowhere as full as DEI VERBUM. It must, however, be remembered that the statement was the work of days, not years, yet surely more could have been said. Shortage of time cannot totally absolve Montreal. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer admits that the statement is surprisingly tentative and explains the fact in terms of the presence of representatives of Orthodox Churches and also the major problem of the One Tradition vis-à-vis the many traditions. We will consider the statement in relation to revelation, inspiration and authority.

1 Scripture and Revelation

Revelation is regarded, though not specified, as the necessary precursor of Scripture. But what is revelation?

a) The *essence* of revelation is that it is the self-disclosure of God. But the 'propositional' view is not favoured for paragraph 67 states: 'the content of the Tradition cannot be exactly defined, for the reality it transmits can never be fully contained in propositional forms'.

b) The *character* of revelation is described as historical and personal in the sense that it is conveyed in the history of Israel and in Christ. Although there is a welcome emphasis on the time-space reality of revelation, there is no mention of what was revelatory in that history. Was it deeds or words or both? With regard to revelation in Christ, the idea of fullness is not brought out as clearly as in DEI VERBUM. There is also no mention of the inter-relation between Israel and Christ within the general framework of revelation.

c) The *relation* between revelation and Scripture is summed up in the words which close the paragraph: 'The Bible is the treasure of the Word of God'.

Revelation is associated with the Word of God and the Bible is said to *contain* it. The Bible, therefore, is not to be regarded in toto as revelation. The favourite concept used here is that of bearing witness; eg 'to give witness to the revelation given...' Scripture is *human* testimony to revelation and, therefore, it is fallible. This is all of a piece with the view of revelation as personal and not propositional; it accords with the note struck by the progressive theologians in DEI VERBUM. Furthermore, the use of the word 'inaugurated' is ambiguous in connection with the ministries of prophets and apostles and leaves open the possibility of some kind of apostolic succession.

2 Scripture and Inspiration

The statement about inspiration is slight. The word is used only in connection with a response to revelation which is predicated equally of 'apostles and disciples'. Who are these 'disciples'? Are they the 'apostolic men' of DEI VERBUM, those authors of New Testament books who were not themselves apostles?

If they were 'apostolic men', it will be seen from the statement that inspiration is extended only to them and not to their written testimony, as 2 Timothy 3:16 requires. Furthermore, the Scriptures were produced following the 'oral and written tradition of the prophets and apostles' and 'under the guidance of the Holy Spirit'. This reference to the fact that traditions lie behind the Scriptural records indicates the recognition granted to oral tradition, source and form criticism in New Testament studies. This contributes to the elevation of Tradition over Scripture in practical terms and also, of course, projects the church.

If, on the other hand, the 'disciples' are ordinary Christians, then certain consequences follow as far as the doctrine of inspiration is concerned. 1 Corinthians 12:13 is quoted as a case of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which is relevant to Scripture. But this means that His inspiration of Scripture is no different from His activity in engendering believing confession, because 1 Corinthians 12:3 refers to the declaration that 'Jesus is Lord'. This weakens the uniqueness of Scripture as God's verbalised expression of His mind and will in all its parts. 'Jesus is Lord' is our witness; Scripture is God's own

witness. Inspiration cannot be reduced to 'the guidance of the Holy Spirit' as Montreal declares.

3 Scripture and Authority

This subject is more difficult to apprehend with confidence for no precise answer is given to the question, 'What is the ultimate authority?' The clearest statement is that Scripture is 'regarded as the written prophetic and apostolic testimony to God's act in Christ, whose authority we all accept'. But this does not help us.

Furthermore, the use of the very formal word *canonisation* in Paragraph 42 conveys the notion of the church bestowing something on the books of the two Testaments. What actually happened was that the church declared what books possessed authority in themselves. This notion of canonisation locates the Bible within the church in such a way that it cannot be really above the church. The influence of the Orthodox is visible here again. What is being argued in this chapter is not that the Bible is alone, but that it is alone supreme. It needs to be stated that, though the Church existed before the Bible was complete, the Church from Sinai onwards was never without a partial and growing Bible. In addition, revelation was given orally before it was actually recorded, so God's people have *always* been under His Word.

Tradition and Traditions

Paragraph 39 shows the influence of the N American working group in which there are what are termed 'working definitions of hinge words'.³² The members of this working group were church historians and they came from the various church groupings within the WCC. As a result, they were well aware of the complexities of their assignment. One of the difficulties they encountered was that the terminology, with which they were forced to work... had neither a single nor a generally acceptable meaning for all concerned. These terms also had polemical associations because of past controversies. That is why these 'working definitions' emerged and they are essential for an understanding of the Montreal Statement and subsequent ecumenical theology.

There is precise agreement between DEI VERBUM and Montreal in the meanings they assign to 'The Tradition' and 'traditions' but there is a possible difference between them in their understanding of 'tradition'.

We will now consider what is said in the Montreal Statement about each of these elements — 'The Tradition', 'tradition' and 'traditions' — and by so doing, throw into relief the nature of the crisis it had to face. We shall then examine some solutions offered to it.

1 'The Tradition'

The authors of the N American report, which lies behind the Montreal Statement, make the revealing comment that this expression caused them grave difficulty. The reason they stated as follows, 'There is a doubt as to its proper use in critical historical parlance'.³³ This means that it is a fabricated term with no history worth mentioning! Those who adopted it justify what

they have done by saying it provides 'some sort of referent to which the plural traditions refer if they can be rightly classed as mutually related to each other'. This, of course, begs the question as to whether all traditions are or can be rightly related — a point assumed here but denied later where some traditions are deemed to be false. This expression, 'The Tradition', serves a purpose without corresponding to any reality. It is functional and aims to turn a theory into a truth. It is ecumenical newspeak. Well might the framers of the report be hesitant about it!

But they adopted it, and so did Montreal. It has, therefore, passed into ecumenism. And what is worse, this has been done in spite of the known fact that 'The Tradition' as a term means different things to those who use it. It can mean 'the act of God in Christ', 'the work of the Spirit in salvation', 'the life of God in the Church', 'the Christian faith', 'the Holy Scriptures' and so on. To adopt a term which means different things to different people is an advantage only to those who are keen to outstrip Humpty Dumpty, who, when he used a word, used it to mean what *he* chose it to mean. In this report, one word is a conglomerate, meaning... perhaps everything. This is desperate and makes for confusion. Whatever the origin of the expression 'The Tradition', it is certainly not biblical. What is more, it is not Protestant. It is located in the direction of Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

One section of the Conference proposed the following statement, 'We can say that we exist as Christians *sola traditione*, by tradition alone'. This sentiment was shared by Protestant and Roman Catholic, but the statement was not approved for fear of its being misunderstood and offending those who upheld *sola scriptura*.³⁴

What is claimed for 'The Tradition' in the Montreal Report is that *it cannot err*.

2 'tradition'

This is the dynamic process by which 'The Tradition' is transmitted in and through the Church. Included in this process are the following, 'the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments and worship, in Christian teaching and theology, and in mission and witness to Christ by the lives of the members of the Church'.³⁵ One may note the similarity between what is included in 'tradition' and what DEI VERBUM has to say about 'Tradition'.

J P Mackay plots the broad outline of the RC view of Tradition as follows:

'They (ie RC theologians) say that the notion of Tradition has two essential elements. They call one the objective element and by that they mean to indicate the truth that is handed on. The second they call the subjective or active element and by that they indicate the process or activity of handing it on'.³⁶

For Protestants, there is a conflict between the two elements, and it is doubtful if a third element could ever be found to remove the antithesis. It lies in the frankly expressed recognition of Montreal that 'tradition can be a faithful transmission of the Gospel, but also a distortion of it'.³⁷ We read in the Montreal Report, 'the traditionary process may operate in either direction,

toward entropy or renewal'. The crux of the matter is that tradition, and its effects, traditions, is not regarded as being inevitably good, in spite of the fact that it operates in and through the church. The possibility of distortion of The Tradition, and consequent disorder is clearly envisaged. This is, of course, a testimony to the continuing influence of the Protestant Reformation and amounts to the assertion — *tradition can err*. -

3 'traditions'

This term designates the various concrete forms actually taken by the traditionary process, eg denominations, confessions, liturgies, politics, etc, etc. These 'proliferate endlessly' and 'exhibit great diversity'.³⁸ The concentration upon traditions in relation to Tradition is what distinguishes Montreal from DEI VERBUM most of all. There, reference is made to Tradition in general terms; its forms are not mentioned. F C Grant states in his response to DEI VERBUM:

'if only the Constitution had said something about the claims made for such doctrines as the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, as based upon sound tradition, it would have clarified the minds of many inquirers. And it might have started a 'dialogue' destined to open the whole question of true tradition and the tests by which extra biblical teaching should be re-evaluated'.³⁹

This is a Protestant outlook. At this point for the Roman Catholic the role of the magisterium and the idea of doctrinal development come in and the existence of the problem is denied. Protestants, however, must say, and Montreal says it, *traditions can be false*, ie not genuine.

Making such an affirmation produces a problem of great magnitude. The unavoidable question Montreal had to raise is, 'how can we distinguish between traditions embodying the true Tradition and merely human traditions? Where do we find the genuine Tradition and where impoverished tradition or even distortion of tradition'?⁴⁰

The Montreal Report provides an answer with regard to both traditions which exist and those which are likely to come into being, ie in the missionary context. The third main section deals with the latter under the heading 'The Christian Tradition and Cultural Diversity'. The emergence of false traditions is to be prevented by application of a three-fold resolve:

- a) To adhere to what is 'basic in the Old and New Testament record and interpretation' in dependence on the 'leading' of the Holy Spirit and with an awareness of God's 'providential operations'.
- b) To refuse to admit anything 'which is at variance with the good news of what God has done, is doing, and will do, in the redemption of the world through our Lord Jesus Christ, as expressed in terms of the church's Christocentric and trinitarian faith.'
- c) To transmit the whole of God's truth (ie 'The Tradition in its fulness') and not to over-emphasise 'those elements which are especially congenial to a particular culture'.⁴¹

But these guidelines are vague. 'What is basic' in the Bible is not specified,

much less 'what is basic' in its interpretation. Further, the question of who decides what comes into this category, is left open.

But what of already existing traditions? How can these be evaluated? The second section of the report entitled 'the Unity of Tradition and the Diversity of Traditions' suggests that what is required is a new way of studying the histories of the various communions — a study of history which is ecumenical in its scope and spirit.⁴²

We turn to the first main section of the Montreal Statement, which is Tradition and Traditions; the need for a criterion is recognised and confessed, and an attempt is made to discover one.⁴³ It is to the New Testament that the Report turns immediately in this search, and describes it as 'an indispensable criterion'. The indefinite article is not in the original text, but we have used it to draw attention to the fact the New Testament is not regarded as sufficient by itself. The truth of this can be seen in the way the report proceeds to speak of the fact and necessity of the church's interpretation of the New Testament. To that, however, must be added the variety of such interpretations. Therefore, the criteriological problem is not only compounded by a hermeneutical one but is thereby rendered insoluble.

As a result of being unable to affirm for differing reasons that Scripture is inerrant, or that the Church (magisterium) is 'indefectible' (Küng's term), there exists no single criterion adequate for the purpose of evaluating traditions. The Montreal report then takes the position that the needed standard is composed both of Scripture and the Church. This is what the Orthodox believe and what Rome teaches. The Montreal Report has no place for the *sola scriptura* of the Reformation. This means that the Reformation challenge to Rome is equally applicable to the ecumenical movement.

It must now be made clear that the breakthrough was not made in terms of the original conflict and its basic issue. That issue was whether Holy Scripture was sufficient and clear to teach the truth and rule the Church by itself (*sola scriptura*). In the Montreal Statement that issue is not raised or addressed. The breakthrough was achieved in terms of what is being thought today about Scripture and Tradition. What is more, it has been achieved by a *deus ex machina* (ie a character invented by a playwright and introduced without warning at the end of a play to solve the problem created by the plot; it is the measure of an author's failure). The Tradition is an ecumenical *deus ex machina* of a verbal kind. It is a way of resolving the head-on clash between Holy Scripture and church tradition; it avoids the grim reality of the conflict. The Tradition includes both, and therefore gives the victory to each.

But is this what is accomplished? Does Holy Scripture come out of this reconstruction as a real victor? The use of the term 'Tradition' for the overarching concept or reality, in which Scripture is given a place, argues against this being the case. The term 'Tradition' leans in a Catholic direction and favours the church over against the Bible. It is, therefore, capable of integration with Roman Catholicism and potentially destructive of Protestantism and of Christianity itself.

THE BREACH

While, from the standpoint of ecumenism, a breakthrough was achieved at Montreal with regard to the Scripture-Tradition conflict, a breach also occurred there with the view of the Bible which had previously held sway in WCC theology. That view was not the evangelical view of the Bible. Rather, the breach which occurred at Montreal was made with the view of the Bible espoused by the Biblical Theology Movement, a twentieth-century school of thought which works on the basis of the neo-orthodox theology of Barth and Brunner. This movement, 'is marked by the combination of a critical approach to the Bible with a confessing theology, emphasising the unity of the Bible and its witness to the history of salvation.'⁴⁴

A symposium of essays, which arose out of the Wadham College conference and expounded its findings, was later published.⁴⁵ It was at the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC that this outlook on the Bible reached the peak of its influence. There, Dr Visser't Hooft, a leading exponent of this theology and General Secretary of the WCC from 1948-1966, declared that it was the Bible which gave the WCC its marching orders. The New Delhi statements repeatedly use the expression 'the biblical understanding' with reference to various subjects it considered, eg reconciliation and service.⁴⁶ It was, of course, at New Delhi that the WCC's basis of membership was enlarged to include a reference to the Scriptures as well as to the Trinity.⁴⁷ As a result it seemed that the WCC had a generally accepted view of Scripture for its base. But this was all to change at Montreal.

The collapse in the view of the Bible which has just been described was brought about by statements which were grounded on the same critical view of the Bible which the Biblical Theology Movement had never repudiated. The force of these statements could not, therefore, be denied. They had the effect of showing that the themes of salvation-history, which are thought to integrate the Bible, were not supported by biblical exegesis of a higher critical kind.

In his address at Montreal entitled 'Unity and Diversity in New Testament Ecclesiology', Ernst Käsemann exploded the notion that the New Testament taught a single view of the Church. Käsemann's thesis aroused many fears for the future of the Ecumenical Movement. 'One Church' no longer seemed an attainable goal.

Flesseman-van Leer lists the following items as consequences of the break which we have been describing:

'it seems impossible to speak univocally any more of *the* biblical message, or *the* biblical doctrine in respect of a particular issue. The importance of critical biblical scholarship was affirmed and the insight that the use of this exegetical tool had far reaching theological consequences was brought home.'⁴⁸

Given such acknowledgement of diversity in the Bible, the questions of its interpretation and authority were inevitably raised. These have been the main subjects on Faith and Order Conference agenda ever since Montreal. Interpretation was dealt with at Bristol in 1967 and authority at Louvain in

1971. A particular nexus of these themes was dealt with at Bangalore in 1977, namely, the relation between the two Testaments. We will survey these briefly and see where the Ecumenical Movement is going with regard to the Bible.

Interpretation

The powerful influence which confessional traditions exerted on member churches as they sought to interpret Scripture was recognised at Montreal. In addition, different 'keys' were used by the churches in their interpretative study — for example, the analogy of faith, the 'centre' of Scripture, the individual conscience, the mind of the church, the deposit of faith and the magisterium. These differences in methodology were bound to lead to diversity of conclusions so the Montreal Report raised the question, 'How can we overcome the situation in which we all read Scripture in the light of our own traditions?' The answer given is that the Tradition should be sought by *corporate* study of the Bible and study of the Fathers of all periods of the Church's history but 'in the light of the ecumenical task.'⁴⁹ Clearly, there is an ongoing search for an ecumenical hermeneutic to match ecumenical historiography! The result is unlikely to be the hearing of the authentic Word of God.

Other influences are being brought to bear on the hermeneutical enterprise beside the ecumenical one. Two of these call for notice and comment.

1 The Human Character of Scripture

The first of these is the almost total preoccupation with the humanness of Scripture. Evangelicals have always doubted whether the divine character of Scripture was being properly acknowledged in ecumenical theology, in spite of the many references to its being the Word of God. Now, however, the pendulum is very definitely at the other extreme.

An influential figure in the discussions at Bristol and Louvain was James Barr. He analysed and summarised the findings of study groups set up following Montreal, and these were incorporated in the report presented at the Bristol Conference. Barr performed the same sort of task for a consultation on authority set up after Bristol for the conference at Louvain. Barr's view of Scripture is well-known and includes the frank admission of error in Scripture as a necessary part of its humanness. He locates the authority of Scripture in its role or function rather than in its character. These views are expressed in the statements approved by the Bristol and Louvain Conferences.

2 Diversity within Scripture

The second influence concerns the diversity present in the Bible which brings its human character to a sharp focus. What is the nature of this diversity? Has not diversity always been regarded as a characteristic of the biblical record? If by diversity no more is meant than a striking and rich variety, then that is true. But more is meant. The Bristol report entitled **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HERMENEUTICAL PROBLEM FOR THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT** declares, 'the Bible contains a collection of very diverse literary traditions, the contents of which often stand in tension with one another.'⁵¹

What kind of tensions is this? While admitting that some differences may be 'complementary aspects of the truth', the report states, 'sometimes, as far as we can see, there may be real contradictions... Such diversities and contradictions should not be glossed over... and it is essential that forced harmonisation should be avoided.' Examples of such contradictions are given — the concept of providence in the Chronicles and the book of Job and the way in which the future of Israel is conceived in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 and Romans 11:25ff. Even Christological statements in the New Testament are sometimes in tension, eg Romans 1:3ff and Matthew 1:18ff and John 1:1f.⁵²

Although the report recognises such admissions have a knock-on effect for the authority of the Bible, there does not seem to be any concern... Barr even talks openly about 'a possibly basic theological disagreement'⁵³ existing in the Bible. By 'basic' is meant what the Bristol report refers to as 'real theological disagreements within the Biblical period itself.' Such disagreements are to be found in the earliest form of the written text. This means there is no hope of peeling away layers of tradition which interpret an earlier form of the text so as to arrive at a text free of contradictions. *This is most serious*; it is to enthrone contradiction in the place of consistency and to deny that unity of truth is to be found in Holy Scripture. Given such a view, what hope can there be for unity in truth in the Church?

However, ecumenists see real gain in viewing Scripture in this way because it immediately has the effect of reducing the grim reality of their own divided state. Instead of viewing their divisions as something to be overcome by resolution, it is now possible to see them in the Bible. The diversity of the churches is rooted in the diversity of Scripture. The Bristol report says:

'the diversity of thought within the Bible reflects the diversity of God's actions in different historical situations and the diversity of human response to God's actions... There is a diversity of church traditions which in some of its aspects may be related to that diversity of traditions already found in the Bible'.⁵⁴

Towards the end of the report, we read:

'the awareness of the differences within the Bible will lead us towards a deeper understanding of our divisions and will help us to interpret them more readily as possible and legitimate interpretations of one and the same Gospel'.⁵⁵

More seriously, of course, Scripture loses its independent status and critical role over the church. How can Scripture possibly function as a theological criterion when it is itself theologically contradictory? If Scripture legitimises the diversity in churches, how can real unity be achieved? Even more seriously, how can the real truth be known?

Authority

One's view of the Bible has inevitable consequences for one's view of its authority. This was acknowledged in the Bristol Conference and so the subject was delegated to its successor.

James Barr acknowledges the possible need to make 'a choice within the

totality of the Bible'⁵⁶ in order that theological interpretation might proceed. This means at least excluding some biblical material from consideration. But who will make such a choice? And on what basis? Excluding Scripture alone, the only options are an ecumenical council, an infallible pope or magisterium or a consensus among biblical scholars. Infallibility is an inescapable concept. The debate is over where it is to be located and how it is to be described. In other words, is infallibility the mark of the Bible, the church or tradition?

What did Louvain have to say on the 'authority of the Bible'? We must draw attention to two matters:

1 The extent of the Canon

This question had not previously been faced by the Faith and Order Movement but, following the Bristol Conference, James Barr noted that attention needed to be given to it because disagreement existed over what should be interpreted. While some regarded the biblical books as a basic source, others saw them only as one expression among others of Christian truth. The delegates at Louvain decided to extend whatever authority biblical books possess to other literature.⁵⁷ Apocryphal literature is bracketed with biblical writings but Louvain concedes that the church recognises the Bible as special. But which church is referred to? And whose Bible? The Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches disagree over the extent of the canon. In opening the canon, Louvain had taken a further step in the direction of weakening the Scripture.

2 The kind of authority

In October 1968, a Faith and Order consultation was held at Böldern near Zürich; it reflected on the Bristol Conference and did preparatory work for Louvain. Its findings and suggestions were summarised by James Barr. The consultation recommended that, in future, any consideration of the authority of the Bible should be approached

*'not by a directly dogmatic method and not by a general consideration of biblical authority abstracted from the exegetical situation, but by the interpretation of particular biblical passages in their relation to a chosen theme.'*⁵⁸

They clearly outlaw the infallible authority of the Bible as an ecumenical option and all the interesting theological questions listed for study are to be considered from within the framework of the Bible's diversity as defined. The scales are loaded.

What is Louvain's view of the Bible's authority? There is no single, straightforward answer but three elements in the answer can be mentioned. The first is that the Bible has 'a certain weight as a literary document'. The second is that it is 'the oldest documentation of the apostolic message' and, as such, it is an unavoidable point of reference of some kind for the church. It is the third which states the distinctive view of authority for which Louvain is known, namely, that the authority of the Bible is a 'relational concept'.⁵⁹ What is meant by this is unfolded in these words, 'when we speak of the "authority" of the Bible in the strict sense we mean that it makes the Word of God audible

and is therefore able to lead men to faith.⁶⁰

The Bible does make its authority felt in this way but what is troubling is that the authority of the Bible should be defined primarily in this way. This statement raises the question of whether the Bible's authority cannot be defined in relation to itself, ie what it *is*, as distinct from what it *does*. Louvain adopts this functional view of authority. It is, in fact, no longer possible or even acceptable in ecumenism to speak of the Bible, its inspiration and authority, as a thing *by itself*. Some connection is always to be made, it seems, between the Bible and the church, or between the Bible and the individual in terms of recognition and interpretation. In practice, therefore, the Bible will not be given its place and role as the supra-human and supra-ecclesiastical Word of God.

It is, of course, the experiencing of the Bible's message as applied by the Holy Spirit which leads one to believe that it is the Word of God. But there lies an important point of theological distinction. This concerns the difference between *what the Bible is* and *how it is perceived to be what it is*. That distinction has been erased by this report if it was ever considered and, as a result, it has become impossible to speak of the Bible apart from the individual believer or the church.

Conclusion

We have been describing a struggle — a struggle between church (ecumenism) and Bible. Vatican II was at great pains to give something more to the Bible in terms of prominence vis-à-vis the church than had formerly appeared to be the case. The Montreal delegates, who consisted of those who were neither Roman Catholics nor Eastern Orthodox, were anxious to speak more positively about the church vis-à-vis the Bible than had been done before. The preceding pages indicate something of the difficulties they all encountered — and, of course, the story has not ended.

But a point has been reached where evangelicals can take stock. How has the Bible fared in all this? There is only one answer possible for an evangelical to give to that question. It is that the Bible has lost out — and lost out to the church.

When 'The Tradition' terminology was adopted at Montreal, Scripture became totally 'ecclesiasticised', ie it was brought within the orbit of the church. As a result, it became notionally impossible for the Bible ever to be detached from the church so as to be above her, and practically impossible for the Bible to be regarded in that way so that it might be the supreme judge of the church in all her affairs. Yet the magisterium of the RC church and the 'Christ in the Church' of the Eastern Orthodox churches remained intact.

When the relational view of inspiration and authority became accepted, the Bible became thoroughly 'humanised'. It became a human record about God, errant in parts, which was to be evaluated and endorsed by human beings and interpreted by them. But even in these areas the church is involved, for such activities properly take place only in the church and by the Spirit in the church.

That the Holy Spirit could be opposed to ecumenism is as impossible as Holy Scripture being so. The Bible has become first and last 'the document of the faith of the church'⁶¹ and is no longer in reality 'the revealed, inspired and inerrant Word of God.'

The church has emasculated the Bible. *Sola ecclesia* or *sola traditione* has replaced *sola scriptura*.

The Rev Hywel R Jones, MA, is Principal of the London Theological Seminary

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