

Religious experience, Scripture, Reason and Tradition

Name

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Introduction

Christian theology has been defined as the research whereby theologians examine the Christian practices and beliefs. Many theologians have used primarily the biblical exegesis, arguments and analysis in interpreting both the old and new testaments alongside the Christian historical traditions (Buschart, 2006). Theological studies help people to better understand the doctrines of Christianity thus drawing comparisons between Christianity and other faiths while defending the Christian faith therefore one can even initiate reforms. During the 1700s, the leader of the Methodist movement John Wesley came up with a method on which to reflect theology that has usually been dubbed the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral'. The Wesleyan method has drawn from four different sources namely; experience, reason, tradition and then scripture. The paper analyses the relationship between religious experience, scripture, reason and tradition. The council of Trent will be also analyzed to try and get a more in-depth analysis on the relationships.

Analysis

Relationship between Experience and Reason

This relationship is said to go hand in hand with the way we receive and understand revelations. According to McGrath, (2016), revelations could be better understood as the activities through which God manifests himself to humans. To add on, God can reveal Himself to man through the experiences which are perceived by the church, or either through the personal experiences people encounter. He can also manifest through any of the sensory experiences. Once a revelation has been received through man experiences, human the use their reason in interpreting the experience. Theologians have often disagreed on whether interpreting the

experiences would require a deep pondering about the experience or it is simply reflecting as well as realizing if the experience did actually happen. They (theologian) have however, agreed that something will only be experienced by humans with intelligence and who have the ability of perceiving what they call 'one's self' and their ability to understand themselves. This has led to the agreement that reason is the ability to one thinking rationally, analytically and logically. Therefore, theological studies require revelations, and the revelations ought to be experienced (Lewis & Travis, 2012). However, we only experience the revelations fully via our reason whereby the reason allows us in both accepting and developing an understanding of the experiences.

Scripture and experience

The 16th century protestant reformation was originally grounded on the hermeneutical *sola scriptura* principle meaning the exclusiveness of the scripture. There was more emphasis being placed on the grammatical-historical biblical text meaning. The other religious knowledge like tradition, experience and reason were being regarded as acceptable if only they were in harmony with what they understood as God's word teaching. However, the approach by the Protestants lost much of its power as the influence of philosophical existentialism, Pentecostalism, encounter theology and the beginning of post-modernism. Today, most of the Christians are relying more on their own subjective experience as opposed to the objective scripture teachings (Taliaferro, Draper, & Quinn, 2010). The seventh day Adventists on the contrary have viewed themselves as the special prophetic movement of the end time who are raised up by God to maintain the Bible. They view the Bible to be the only standard of all the doctrines and as the basis of the Christian reforms. If it is true that Christian religions consist of

the living experience with God as well remaining loyal to the scripture teachings, the question that arises is what roles do the scripture and experience play in the life of a Christian?

Scripture overrules experience

Many denominations in Christianity have over time replaced the scripture teachings with anti-biblical components of the modern culture. The attempt to reverse the process has made some people to overrule their personal experience with an emphasis on the scripture teachings. This means that the objective dimensions of religion can speak more loudly as opposed to the subjective one and thus obedience to any given rules body will overshadow a living relationship with Jesus Christ. The outcome which naturally comes out of this approach is maybe legalism or formalism. The cognitive scripture content has undoubtedly played a foundational role within the life of a Christian. As argued by Apostle Paul, for someone to believe in God, they ought to have an objective knowledge of God (Romans 10:13-15). This means that we ought to first know God before we believe in Him thus faith has content and an object. It can be said that as biblical doctrines are meaningful, true religion is more than just using intellectual convictions (Taliaferro, Draper, & Quinn, 2010).

Experience overruling scripture

Many Christian have departed from the old cold formalism of using a mere intellectual religion. They have thus overruled the cognitive component of the scripture and started using some kind of charismatic or existential type of religion. It has replaced I-It relationships with the more personal I-Your and thus treating people and God as persons though whom we can form relationships as opposed to just objects of fulfilling our needs. This approach has greatly aided in shaping what is called 'theology of encounter' whereby to personally and individually know God

is the main aim as opposed to just knowing about him. Many Christians of modern times trust in the supposed voice of spirit where they speak to their own minds more than they texts of the Bible. They justify this using Paul's statement that the grammar (letter) kills but the pneuma (spirit) gives life (2 Cor 3:6) where Paul is trying to contrast the old and the new covenants.

Despite the distortions which are proposed by both charismatic theology and encounter theology, the basic for the Christian religions is personal experience with God (Carson, 2016). The Bible has placed the relationship with God as being the basis of all the true knowledge. To acknowledge that both experience and scripture play a vital role in Christian religions, there is the need to in detail consider how they can relate in the life of a Christian.

Experience equaling scripture

Some Christians have seen the need to keep together both the scripture and experience and have been tempted to equate the two. A good example is the Wesleyan quadrilateral where scripture, tradition, reason and experience have been placed on the same level of authority. There have been however, some arguments that the image of a quadrilateral is not the best representation of the theology of John Wesley. They argue that a tetrahedral pyramid is the most suitable where scripture would serve as the pyramid's foundation. The other three sides (tradition, reason and experience) will be labeled as complementary but not labeled as the primary sources of authority of religion. According to some scholars, this is because attempting to raise experience to the same level as scripture has created a certain kind of what they refer to as 'divided loyalty'. These lead to sometimes the scripture overruling the experience and other times the scripture being overruled by experience. The human reason as well as personal taste is the ones which decide which of the two should have the primacy over the other. This will mean

that the Bible verses one likes and agrees with will be recognized as being normative. The ones the person dislikes will be regarded as obsolete and culturally conditioned (Bauckham & Drewery, 2004). Though the scripture authority is acknowledged, such an authority is often overshadowed by experience.

Scripture mediating experience

The Bible has clearly stated that human saving expedience with God will have to be informed and mediated by the written word of God. David in Psalms calls the word of God a lamp to hu8ma feet and the light to their path (psalms 119:105). Jesus Christ categorically said that His followers ought to live by ‘every word which comes from God’s mouth. Paul goes on to say that anyone who calls the Lord’s name shall be saved. Those biblical verses give the implication that the word of God which is scripture supersedes experience. Scriptural evidence has indicated that the word from which Christians are to live by is not subjective impression of the Holy Spirit to the Christian’s conscience. The word in this case can refer to the objective prophetic voices which have been recorded in the scripture.

How Protestants and the Catholics understand the relationship

Protestants have held the claim that the Bible is the only rule for faith and thus it contains all the resources one may need for theology. This material is believed to be sufficiently clear therefore the Bible does not need any apostolic tradition or any magisterium authority from the church to help in understanding it. In the view of the Protestants, the whole truth for Christianity is found in the Bible and anything extraneous to the Bible is to them non-authoritative and unnecessary (Küng, 2013).

Catholics on the contrary have held the view that the Bible does not endorse the Protestants understanding and that it is repudiated in scripture. They argue that the true rule of faith as has been expressed in the Bible is scripture plus some apostolic tradition. This tradition to them is manifested in the teaching authority given to the Catholic Church which has been entrusted to interpret the scripture in the correct way. The relationship between tradition and scripture has been explained in the Second Vatican Council's document on divine revelation. It argues that there exists a communication as well as a connection between sacred scripture and sacred tradition. The sacred scripture is the word of God which has been consigned to writing through the inspiration of the divine spirit. To those who succeeded the apostles as the Catholics believe, the sacred tradition hands the full purity of God which is entrusted on the leaders of the church by the Holy Spirit. According to Catholicism, ten successors when they preach preserve faithfully the word of God explaining it and making it widely known. The church uses the sacred tradition to explain the sacred scripture meaning both can be accepted and venerated with using the same reverence and devotion.

The Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestants have placed their confidence in the theory of Martin Luther of scripture alone and thus argue using verses to defend their position. They argue that the all scripture has been inspired by God for correction and profitable teachings so that the son of God maybe equipped. They therefore argue that the scripture alone is the basis of our faith and that no tradition should be attached to it.

The Council of Trent

The council of Trent held between 1545 and 1563 in Bologna, Italy was among the vital ecumenical councils of the Roman Catholic Church. It was prompted by the protestant

reformation and has been seen as the embodiment from which the church was to counter the reformation (Donovan, 2011). It was the one which led to the second Vatican council normally referred to as Vatican II which brought some significant reforms to the church. The council condemned the heresies of the Protestants and made some clarifications of its teachings and doctrines.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the Christian religion is personal experience with both God and fellow human beings. Therefore humans cannot discard religion's experimental element without the ruining of their religion as a whole. Today, many Christians are accepting an experience-centered religious approach that has left the scripture open to a variety of interpretations which are subjective. Those supporting the *Sola Scriptura* principle will not regard experience to be the same or to be on a higher level than scripture. They say that the Holy Spirit who inspired the canonical prophets shall guide all believers to a full conformity with the word of God. Christ himself stated that when this spirit of truth shall come, he will guide us to all truth and sanctify us by the truth. This means that human experience ought to be mediated and guided by the sacred scripture. Our experience with God should grow us closer to the scripture instead of departing us from it.