

General Introduction

From the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century, there arose a new way of looking at human reality which is described with the expression ‘modern historical consciousness’. A new awareness of the past and of history arose which made scholars realise that the world of humans is more historically conditioned as had hitherto been known. The world came to be viewed as something in constant change. The awareness of the irreversibility and uniqueness of past events became deeper. The historical nature of human existence – individual human beings, human cultures, human institutions and human knowledge was recognised in a deeper way.¹ Being became understood not longer in the static sense but in its sense of becoming and was also studied in this sense.

The result of this was the relativisation of all individual phenomena which, now understood as products of historical ‘becoming’, have lost their status of absoluteness and were understood to be part of the historical process of development.² This, in turn, led to the view that all human knowledge is temporary and must be replaced by new understandings of reality in the course of history. Change, as a process of development, became the key concept of history. The better world lies in the future and not in the past.³

A concomitant change in historiology was the consequence of these changes. Pre-Modern historiology, which is understood to have made use of myths, fables, lores and legends, were no longer regarded as having recounted history. It was replaced by chronological and log reportage as the only effective means of narrating and communicating the truth of historical events. The consequence of this was that historical studies began to transcend the mere discovery and representation of historical resources to searching for the ‘real’ historical event which was supposed to have been concealed in the many plots, subplots and interpretations of pre-modern historiology.

There arose too the conscious effort to free oneself from the past which is now viewed as ‘pre-critical’. Where Tradition is perceived as historically

¹ Zimmer, Siegfried: *Schadet die Bibelwissenschaft dem Glauben?* 138.

² Cf., Ratzinger, Joseph: *Das Problem der Dogmengeschichte in der Sicht der katholischen Theology*, Köln: Westdeutscher, 1966 (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 139), 7.

³ See Zimmer, Siegfried: *Schadet die Bibelwissenschaft dem Glauben? Klärung eines Konflikts*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006, 135.

conditioned, alternative new ideas were sort. In this way, modern historical consciousness began to relativise the power of the past and functioned as a liberating movement. In it, the authority of Tradition was taken over by ‘experience’ and ‘reason’.⁴ Tradition was accepted or rejected according to its stance with regard to the experience of the modern man. This, in turn, introduced a new notion according to which knowledge is a result of empirical and ‘experimental’ method.⁵ Verifiable methods and their constant improvement became decisive for scientific scholarship. Reason, which has been the major means of managing the massive changes in the modern era, became too the authoritative pilot of the new historical consciousness. Where appeal was previously made to Tradition for the support of pre-modern political and religious structures and ideas, appeal is now made to reason for the dismantling of structures and ideas which are perceived as incongruous with modernisation.

Now, religion and theology were also taken up in this new historical consciousness. As Joseph Ratzinger once put it: “Just as the Middle Ages undertook a *reductio in theologiam* in all fields of learning, a *reductio in historiam* began to occur, as it is, everywhere.”⁶ In university theology and exegesis, effort was made to express the Christian faith in the emerging historical categories. The results are biblical studies which are profoundly oriented according to the modern historical consciousness and methods. Thought and speech patterns of antiquity (biblical times) and the process of the origin of the Bible became matters for exegesis. Historical and geographical data provided by the Bible were also subjected to historical checks. In doing so, the possibility of supernatural occurrences became also a matter for debate. These were mostly no longer seen as ‘historical facts’ but as ‘myths’ which are to be assessed primarily according to their theological and not historical content. The emergent historical criticism began to distinguish between historical events in the Bible and the interpretations given to them by sacred authors. The historical research began too to reconstruct the original message from which the texts of the Bible are supposed to have been constructed by the sacred authors.

The results of modern exegesis became increasingly divergent from the results of dogmatic and traditional exegesis such that dogmatic theologians

⁴ Zimmer, Siegfried: *Schadet die Bibelwissenschaft dem Glauben?* 139.

⁵ Zimmer, Siegfried: *Schadet die Bibelwissenschaft dem Glauben?* 135. Cf. Schröter, Jens: *Jesus und die Anfänge der Christologie*, 6.

⁶ Cf., Ratzinger, Joseph: *Das Problem der Dogmengeschichte*, 7.

first began to ignore exegesis and then to criticise its methods and results. Many exegetes and theologians became increasingly worried not only about the methods of modern exegesis but also of the effects of its exegetical approach on the faith and practice of the Church. Many post-modern exegetes began to insist on the primacy of the final text of the Bible in exegesis and to look for alternative methods of biblical exegesis. Canonical exegesis arose in this connection to provide an alternative (or, as some would say, a complementary) method to historical critical exegesis.

Today, it is not only modern critical exegetes who are critical and suspicious of dogmatic and traditional exegesis: Many post-modern exegetes and theologians have also developed an attitude of criticism and suspicion against historical critical exegesis. Although the effect of this mutual criticism has not only been negative but, in some aspects salutary, there exist a conflict which divides not only exegetes but also theologians.

This wind of change, which began in the Western culture, has also had its effects on Islam. Fazlur Rahman, a prominent modern Islamic scholar whose contribution to Qur'anic exegesis will be a part of this work, summarised this fact thus: "Like all great religions, Islam has apparently felt the impact of, and responded to, the manifold forces of modern life – intellectual, scientific and socio-political – since the dawn of the impingement of the modernity on Muslim society. There is hardly a facet of the life of Muslim society which has remained untouched, and the story of these impacts and the Muslim attempts to absorb, transform, reject, or adjust to these forces, is fascinating for the historian and instructive for a reformer."⁷ But unlike in Christianity, where the new historical consciousness found inroad into exegesis, orthodox Islam has sought to shield Qur'anic exegesis from historical critical exegesis. The *Ulama*, the elite scholars and custodians of Tradition in Islam, have successfully shielded the hegemony of Tradition in Qur'anic exegesis from the boring eyes of historical criticism. Moslems, who have tried to make historical critical researches into the Qur'an, have been frustrated out of the quest.

But this has not saved Islam and Qur'anic exegesis from the inevitable confrontation with the realities presented by modern ways of life and thought. Pointers to this fact are the numerous reform and counter-reform movements which have swept through Islam in the last centuries – revival-

⁷ Rahman, Fazlur: *The Impact of Modernity on Islam*. In: Jurji, J. Edward (Ed.): *Religious Pluralism and World Community*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969 248.

ism, modernism, neo-revivalism and fundamentalism. Each of these movements has tried to interpret the Qur'an in its own way – with or without a method, sometimes with a measure of success and sometimes unsuccessfully. The result is that, although traditional Qur'anic exegesis still holds sway in Islam, many Muslim scholars are already looking for alternative approaches to Qur'anic exegesis.

Here, again, reigns a situation of mutual criticism. The alternatives which modern Qur'anic exegetes are seeking to provide are viewed by traditional exegetes with suspicion. Modern exegetes accuse traditional Qur'anic exegesis of having forsified the Qur'an so that it no longer provides answers to today's problems. Today, Qur'anic exegesis is characterised by schools of thought ranging from ultra-conservative traditionalism through moderate views to budding liberalism.

One sees then that, although mainstream biblical and orthodox Qur'anic exegesis took different directions in scriptural interpretation in modern times, both Christianity and Islam are faced with some sort of conflict in method, an ongoing dialogue in the field of scriptural interpretation. This work wants to be part of this ongoing dialogue. Its goal is to find out how biblical and Qur'anic exegesis could benefit from each other's long experience. This means that this work does not seek to compare Christianity with Islam or to judge Muslim exegetical tradition with Christian exegesis (and vice versa). It wishes rather to be a participant in the wider ecumenical debate about methods in exegesis.

This thought is what has motivated this work. We wish to take a look at the criticisms which has been levelled against both biblical and Qur'anic exegesis in recent times. Our goal is to establish the nature and the points of the conflict, the weak and strong points in the exegesis of the Bible and the Qur'an with a view to drawing necessary lessons from these. It is not a rare occurrence that people are tempted, in situations as is obtainable in today's biblical and Qur'anic exegesis, to retrace their steps and move in an opposite direction. Before such a U-turn, it may be useful to take a 'pre-look' at possible pitfalls by examining the successes and failures of those who have gone the path before.

To realise this intention within the boundaries of this work, we have chosen two theologians – Joseph Ratzinger and Rahman Fazlur – whose works will serve as reference points for our examination of the situation of scriptural interpretation in Christianity and Islam. We have chosen these two

not just because they seem to have swum against the academic current of their time but because they undertook a relatively impressive critique of the situation of exegesis and theology in their different religions.

This work will accordingly be divided into three parts. The first part will discuss Joseph Ratzinger's criticisms of modern exegesis. This part will be subdivided into four chapters. In chapter one Joseph Ratzinger's understanding of Revelation, Tradition and Scripture will be discussed. This will lead us into chapter two and three where his criticisms (which is principally based on his understanding of Revelation, Tradition and Scripture) of two major trends in modern exegesis – historical critical exegesis and the exegesis of the liberation theology respectively - will be discussed. Since he describes the situation of exegesis as that of crisis, he also proffers ways out of this crisis. In chapter four, therefore, his suggestions as to how exegesis can find a better method for its endeavour will be discussed.

Part two will be dedicated to exposing the situation of Qur'anic exegesis as seen by Fazlur Rahman. This part will also be made up of four chapters – chapter five to eight. In chapter five, we will examine Fazlur Rahman's understanding of revelation and of the Qur'an. In chapter six his critique of traditional Qur'anic exegesis will be discussed. Chapter seven will be dedicated to his critique of the modern trends in Qur'anic exegesis. Chapter eight will deal with the 'double movement' method which he proffers as the solution to the crisis in Qur'anic exegesis.

In part three, which is going to be short (with only one chapter), the lessons which may be learnt from the situation of exegesis in Christianity and Islam will be summarised.

It may be helpful to note the following regarding this work: we have used the Jerusalem Bible mostly. But since many authors prefer to use the New Revised Standard Edition, we have allowed quotations from this edition especially when it makes the views of such authors clearer. For our discussion of Qur'anic exegesis, we have favoured the edition titled *The Glorious Quran* translated by Muhammad Pickthall (10th edition, 1994). But here again, we have allowed the use of other editions where authors favoured these other editions and where such editions make their points clearer. Further, attempt has been made to present this work purely in English. Except for a few Latin concepts or expressions, we have translated quotations from non English sources into English. Hence, all quotations from books with non English references represent our personal translations.

Part One
Joseph Ratzinger's Critique of Modern Exegesis

Introduction

To many theologians and exegetes of the modern age, Joseph Ratzinger's theological and exegetical ideas represent a rigid traditionalism which can, at best, be described as backward. They are no more than a re-presentation of the allegorical-typological interpretation of the 'Wüstenväter' (Desert Fathers)¹. For many others, Joseph Ratzinger's works represent the climax of the development of biblical exegesis from early Christianity till date. For the latter, the Catholic biblical renewal which was promoted by the popes and which culminated in *Dei Verbum* found its full bloom in Joseph Ratzinger's command of biblical texts, patristic exegesis and the findings of historical and literary scholarship.²

Joseph Ratzinger was born on a Holy Saturday, the 16 of April, 1927 at Marktl am Inn, a community in the state of Bavaria, Germany. He attended primary school in Aschau am Inn where his family moved to in 1932. In 1941 he was conscripted into the compulsory service of the Hitler Youth. After the war, he entered the seminary of Freising and did his 'Abitur' certificate in Chiemgau-Gymnasium.

Joseph Ratzinger began the study of theology and philosophy in 1946 at the Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule in Freising. He was ordained a priest in 1951. He obtained the doctorate in theology in 1953 at the University of Munich with a dissertation on 'The People and the House of God in Augustine's Doctrine of the Church'. He habilitated in 1957 at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich with a work on the theology of history in St. Bonaventure's theology. This work and his study of the Fathers of the Church contributed immensely to the formation of his theological ideas.

In 1958, at the age of 31, he became a professor of Dogmatic and Fundamental Theology at his Alma Mater, the Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule in Freising. From 1959 till 1963 he held the chair of Fundamental Theology at the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Bonn. In 1963 he was called to the chair of Dogmatic Theology and the History of Dogma in the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster where he held his first lecture on the theme 'Revelation and Tradition'. In

¹ Cf., Kampling, Rainer: Jede Kontroverse um des Himmels willen trägt bleibende Früchte. In: Södling, Thomas (Ed.): Das Jesus-Buch des Papstes. Die Antwort der Neutestamentler, Freiburg: Herder, 2007, 72-74.

² Hahn, W. Scott: The Authority of Mystery. The Biblical Theology of Benedict XVI. In: Letter and Spirit 2 (2006), 98.

1966 he took over the chair of Catholic Dogmatic Theology at the Faculty of Catholic Theology in the Eberhard Karl's University in Tübingen. It was during his tenure at this chair that he wrote the popular book "Introduction to Christianity" in 1968. In 1969 he moved over to the University of Regensburg where he taught Dogmatic Theology and the History of Dogma. He became the vice-president of this university in 1976.

A very important event which helped shape the direction of Joseph Ratzinger's academic life was his participation in the work of the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) to which he accompanied Cardinal Frings as his theological adviser and speech writer. During the Council he participated in the formulation and deliberation of the Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation. Here he made many contributions which helped shape the final document of the Council *Dei Verbum*. But his analysis of this document also shows that it came somehow short of what he would have wished. This may have provided the final impetus which propelled his many works concerning Sacred Scripture: for he was later to regret the failure of some of his suggestions to win the consent of many of his colleagues during the deliberations. In any case, this document of the Council, *Dei Verbum*, became the fulcrum of his theology, exegesis and criticism of modern exegesis.

It was also during this Council that many came to misunderstand him as a liberal modernist after the speech he wrote for Cardinal Frings in which the revered Cardinal demanded the reforming of the Roman Curia. Perhaps his close cooperation with such liberal reform-theologians like Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner helped create this image of him at that time. But the works he wrote before and after this Council and the positions he held about theological and ecclesial issues during his tenure as the head of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith have continued to prove this view of him wrong. Although he advocated change and reform in many issues, he did not subscribe to a reform that breaks completely with the past. Change and Reform should, in his view, be built on the heritage of the past. This attitude has also formed the backbone of his critique of modern exegesis.

In 1977 Joseph Ratzinger was made the Archbishop of Munich and Freising and was created a cardinal in the same year. In 1981 he became the Cardinal Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and, thus, the highest ranking doctrinal official in the Catholic Church. In this

capacity he oversaw, for twenty four years, the teaching of the Catholic faith in the universal Church – in seminaries, universities and Catholic theological institutions in the whole world. During this time, he also played leading roles in the work of the International Theological Commission, the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the formulation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In 2002 he was elected the Dean of the College of Cardinals. He was elected the pope in 2005 and thus became the leader of the Catholic Christian world.

Both during his time as a professor in the university and later as the ‘watchdog’ of the Catholic faith, Joseph Ratzinger published many articles in academic and ecclesial journals and granted interviews where he discussed the state of the Christian faith and of biblical exegesis. He participated in seminars and workshops and delivered lectures on the state of the Christian faith and on biblical exegesis and theology. He also wrote many books on diverse branches of Christian theology – patristic theology, exegesis, ecclesiology, liturgy and dogmatic theology. He co-founded the theological journal *Communio* together with Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

In all these works one could discern how much his encounter with the historical critical exegesis (modern exegesis) influenced his academic career. His struggle in defence of the Catholic faith against what he understood as the vagaries of the historical critical exegesis became the fulcrum of his theology and exegesis. At the beginning of his article “*Biblical Interpretation in Conflict*” he bemoaned the general state of confusion in biblical interpretation occasioned by the ever increasing intricate and complicated approaches adopted by the historical-critical method. Its hypotheses, he said, have continued to branch out and diversify. The different branches have made themselves independent with the general result that they have become “... a visible fence that barred the way to the Bible for the uninitiated” whereas the initiate “... no longer reads the Bible, but dissects it into the elements from which it is supposed to have grown.”³

Yet, Joseph Ratzinger does not think that the entire historical critical exegesis is a wasted effort. In the spirit of the Enlightenment, it had sought to free itself from the traditional methods of biblical interpretation and to uncover what it regarded as the original, unadulterated message of the Bible

³ Ratzinger, Joseph: *God’s Word. Scripture, Tradition, Office*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008, 92.