Revelation and Culture

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The bearing of Christian revelation on culture and of culture on divine revelation was stated in one way at the beginning of our century, in another way in the twenties and thirties, and is being stated in still another way in the present.

By culture we mean those beliefs and practices that distinguish one society from another, those norms and patterns of activity that define the lifeview and lifestyle of a people.

At the beginning of the twentieth century many Christian missionaries seemed to require of converts a comprehensive decision for Western culture along with a decision for Christ. Their problem was compounded by the fact that Western culture, unlike that of Asia and Africa, contained many Christian elements. To identify American culture with Christianity was, therefore, casier than to identify Christianity with Asian and African cultures. But inevitably it became a forefront missionary concern to avoid projecting Jesus as a kind of Euro-American model as missionary leaders became increasingly alert to the danger of diluting the transcultural uniqueness of God's revelation.

Missionaries were no less concerned that receptor communities avoid assimilating the incarnate Christ to their entrenched cultural norms and to inherited misconceptions about the invisible world. In India evangelical missionaries found it necessary to insist that Christ is no mere *avater*, since many Hindus regarded Jesus as but one of many divine manifestations in the flesh. Christianity claims to be a transcultural religion of miraculous once-for-all incarnation and redemption, and forbids merging its presuppositions with the speculative cosmology and anthropology of nonbiblical religions and secular philosophies. The Bible insistently thrusts its message into the world culture of its own time and of ours in the name of transcendent revelation. Nothing less is involved than a full confrontation of all ages and aeons when the writer of Hebrews declares that "in these last days" God has spoken his consummatory Word in his Son (1 : 2) and that Christ "has appeared once and for all at the climax of history to abolish sin by the sacrifice of himself ... and will appear a second time ... to bring salvation" (9 : 26, 28, NEB);

no less stupendous is the apostle Paul's proclamation to the Greeks that God "has fixed the day on which he will have the world judged, and justly judged, by a man of his own choosing" — the crucified and risen Nazarene (Acts 17 : 31, NEB). The danger of geographically or culturally limiting this transcultural revelation was a necessary concern of the entire evangelical community.

Today the revelation-and-culture debate reverberates with much deeper and more distressing problems. Almost every discussion of Scripture doctrine and interpretation now wrestles with the contention that all religious claims are inevitably and inescapably culture-conditioned, even those of the Christian religion.

It should be said at once that Christians have never considered their religion to be superhistorical and supercultural in all respects. Some mystical Asian religions, both ancient and modern, argue as does Zen that human reason distorts all divine truth, and that human language corrupts it. Muslims depict the Koran as a direct transcript of God's *ipsissima verba* eternally written in Arabic and preexisting in heaven. Mormons affirm that an angel messenger delivered their books in the form of now long-missing gold tablets. In the context of the Christian connection of biblical revelation with human reason and with language and history such claims appear bizarre.

Christianity traces the very possibility of culture to the Creator's gifts of human reason, language and dominion. Cultural development is both divinely intended and humanly necessary. Only the dreadful intrusion of sin altered human allegiance to Elohim, sweeping man's social patterns into the service of alien gods and engendering bleak misconceptions of the supernatural. Not even at its best is culture therefore the revelation of God; human resistance to God's pruposive will has corrupted it. For all that, culture remains the universal human context within which God addresses his own transcultural revelation to God.

Language is the primary means of cultural expression. Without language, no generation of mankind could convey its conceptual distinctives to succeeding progeny. If we may properly call language a cultural "form", then we may say that in the period between 1400 B. C. and A. D. 100 God used the specific cultural forms of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek language to convey his inscripturated Word to certain Mediterannean peoples. The biblical languages are not noncultural means of communication. God intends, moreover, that we proclaim his scripturally revealed Word to all peoples in languages intelligible to them. The fact that some languages may have imperfect word-systems or restricted verb tense possibilities does not frustrate the meaning and truth of God's revelation; the varied linguistic idioms of the human race are fully

adequate to convey the divine "thus saith the Lord."

God's communication of redemptive revelation in the Hebrew and Greek languages does not imply, however, that he approved and applauded Hebrew and Greek cultures per se. The inspired writers bring under divine judgment not only rebellious foreign cultures but also the culture of backslidden ancient Jews who invited exile, and of the retrograde Christian society that prevailed in Corinth.

Not only are the biblical languages culturally-contingent, moreover, but the genres of scriptural communication also reflect then existing literary forms. While Gospels as theological biography may be a distinctive form, poetry, proverb, parable, historical narrative, and other genres are common both to the Bible and to the literary milieu of its time.

The meaning-criteria for identifying the sense of Scripture, furthermore, does not differ from the tests that apply to language, speech and writing in general. To be sure, the Bible finds in the Logos of God the ultimate source of all meaning and truth. But the principles for understanding Scripture do not differ from those for understanding other writings. The functions of understanding are universal; human culture itself is possible only because humans are creationally endowed with common rational and moral capacities. There is no such thing as "cultural understanding", although there are cultural prejudices and culturally shared beliefs. Understanding pertains to clarifying words and concepts that may involve a diversity of meaning. Which particular content one assigns to a word or concept depends upon a critical judgment, not upon cultural determination. Prevailing cultural beliefs can of course deeply influence critical judgment, but culture does not actually necessitate or dictate one's judgment and views.

To hurriedly reduce thought and language to a mere byproduct of man's sociological development arbitrarily rules out a theistic explanation. In fact it rules out any and all significant explanation. Christianity holds that by divine creation all human thought and language share certain common structures, for all mankind is divinely intended for knowledge of both God and human duty. Not even the world's great diversity of languages and cultures can fully relativize the meaning-content or the truth of linguistic expression. To deny this fact is to reduce even one's own denial to senseless prattle.

The biblical prophets leave no doubt that Yahweh addressed them in intelligible sentences. Divine revelation, evangelical Christianity emphasizes, consists not of unrelated word-units but of semantically-related word-constellations, or propositions. Revelational truth can therefore lift the recipient

above transitory cultural perspectives and convey valid alternatives. The Old Testament repeatedly rejects its contemporary pagan cultural milieu. This fact is clearly evident in the Hebrew condemnation of idolatry, witchcraft and sorcery; in the Old Testament's unbending emphasis that Yahweh is the one and only living God, and in its distinction of true from false prophets.

But present-day thought increasingly challenges the historic evangelical emphasis on supercultural and transcultural divine revelation. Christian scholars are meshed in deep debate over the issues of cultural conditioning, contextualization and enculturation of the biblical message. Their discussion involves not only the question of scriptural inerrancy, but also the validity of propositional revelation and of divine transcultural disclosure. The turning issue is no longer merely the danger of monocultural reduction of a transcultural revelation; instead, it involves comprehensive and diverse proposals for multicultural revisions of a biblical heritage now regarded as deeply rooted in ancient cultures. No flashpoint of contemporary Christian dialogue is currently more crucial.

In the first third of this century it was Protestant modernism that spearheaded discussions concerning culturally-conditioned revelation. Modernists insisted that all religious beliefs inherited from the past are conditioned by their cultural context.

This Neoprotestant verdict had a twofold philosophical basis, namely, faith in evolutionary progress that elevates the present above the past, and confidence that scientific method empirically accredits sound beliefs. Modernists considered no part of the Bible and no article of the creeds acceptable unless validated by modern scientific criteria. They charged evangelical Christians with promoting and practising an ancient culture-conditioned religion. While they agreed that the Bible commendably rejects animism and polytheism and much else that the modern world derides, modernists spurned the biblical doctrine of once-for-all relevatory redemption. The Bible's central role for miracle, they said, requires a prescientific worldview that breaches the all-pervading casual continuity demanded by modern scientism.

But if, as modernism believed, God is immanent in and revealed in the universal human cultural development, why did the modernist view himself as standing in a somewhat transcendent relation to culture? Why did the modernist consider himself, on the basis of contemporary insights, to be the definitive arbiter of religious reality? The answer, as William R. Hutchison observes, lay in the fact that the modernist belief-cluster included not only "cultural immanentism" but also "a religiously-based progressivism" and "the conscious, intended adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture" (*The Modernist*

Impulse in American Protestantism, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Eng., Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 2). As modernists saw it, sages in the past had accepted what was consonant with the age in which they lived as the standard of belief and behavior; the inspired biblical writers had likewise lacked truth valid for all time. But the modernists so periodized history that they considered their own dogmas not simply superior to all that had gone before, but as the very norm of civilized belief and conduct. Religious ideas were to be conformed ideally and finally to twentieth century culture, not indeed to modern Asian or African culture, but to Western culture in which God was thought to be specially present and active. Although past cultures had erected decisive roadblocks to religious progress, modern Euro-American culture was presumably overcoming all such obstacles. If the God of our fathers lisped Hebrew and Greek during his infancy and adolescence, in these more mature years he spoke sagacious high German abroad and, on this side of the Atlantic, Yankee English with a Bostonian accent and Unitarian premise.

Modernists thus exempted their own favored pronouncements from the inescapable cultural relativism that they elsewhere ascribed to religious conceptions. This they did by presupposing a providential convergence of the rise of modernism with the emerging kingdom of God. Evolving culture as they saw it was not corrupted or corruptive but merely incomplete; modernist education, legislation and socialization would now facilitate the perfection of culture. Confidence that the wisdom of the ages had culminated in modernism encouraged modernists to elevate liberal theologians above biblical prophets and apostles and to dignify them as consummatory agents in the divine regeneration of culture. The modernists, by relegating all past revelatory beliefs to cultural contingency, while elevating their own special tenets to a consciousness that transcends changing cultural embodiments, hoped to achieve the ultimate renewal and final conversion of culture.

Although some modernists timidly declared the Christian revelation to be normative, they conformed it to modern culture, while others, more boldly and consistently, retained only biblical fragments that they considered reconcilable with scientific empiricism. In either case the current mood conferred little survival value upon the past. Modernism enthroned empirical method to measure biblical religion and evaluate theological beliefs; it viewed even the Bible's noblest convictions, however irreducible to ancient cultural counterparts, as somehow dependent upon and rooted in ancient cultural contexts. Modern liberal Jewish thought as well as modern liberal Christian thought prized modern culture as the intellectual framework over against which the biblical

heritage appeared inferior. Instead of allowing Judeo-Christian revelation to set the agenda for theological inquiry and perspective, modernism made the empirical tradition of humanistic culture the norm for all religious interpretation. A few faint-hearted mediating scholars suggested that Jesus had knowingly accommodated himself to the culture of his day. But since Jesus himself provided no basis for distinguishing when he thus accommodated his teaching, the result was the same: only what modernists approved escaped the odium of cultural relativity.

Modernists did not apply to their own teachings the principle of culture-dependence by which they overruled the finality of all past revelational claims. But a cataclysmic culture-shock ironically and unexpectedly challenged the exemption from culture-conditioning that modernists had conferred upon their views. The second World War, following fast upon the first, staggered liberal confidence in evolutionary progress. It also posed a crisis for the theory that modern culture is decisively revelatory: increasing signs of the decline of Western culture rendered problematic the modernist faith in God's radical immanence in culture and eroded confident expectation of an emerging Christian civilization nurtured by modernist theologians. New emphasis on man's all-pervasive sinfulness precipitated the loss of historical optimism as well as a decline of faith in philosophical reasoning.

Because modernists projected the superiority of their theories so vigorously, the intellectual contradiction and lack of homogeneity of those theories became apparent only gradually. But the supposed logic of the modernist position underwent increasing strain. Interjection of contemporary currents of thought into Christian beliefs led to an evolution-oriented eclipse of any significant doctrine of divine creation, to rejection of the divinity of Jesus Christ, to a "moral example" view of the atonement, and to subjectifying the biblical view of divine justification.

Liberals finally conceded that their empirical methodology requires assuming that all doctrines and moral principles are tentative; they were forced to restate their asserted finality of Jesus in terms only of his life-transforming influence and with no reference to special metaphysical claims.

Neoorthodoxy aggressively attacked these pseudo-Christian commitments and soon pronounced the death of classic rationalistic modernism. Focussing attention on the dire moral predicament of mankind, it stressed the need for transcendent divine revelation and redemption. Tough-spirited modernists could reply, and with some reason, that neoorthodoxy reflected a cultural stance no less than did modernism, since its emphasis on radical transcendence involved no primary appeal to the objective authority of the Bible, but mirrored

prevalent European philosophy. Necessary as it was to retreat from evolutionary utopianism, they said that modernists that retreat need not require the abandonment of world-pervading divine immanence and of culture-conditioned revelation. Over against Barthianism with its one-sided emphasis only on special sporadic revelation, liberalism insisted both on universal revelation and on a variety of revelational modes; over against evangelical orthodoxy, liberalism refused to exempt even divine revelation from dependence on culture. The modernists therefore revised their view of God's disclosure in and through all cultural development by simply deleting their earlier assumption that earthly history merges progressively into the kingdom of God. At the same time they continued to deny the true extent of divine-human alienation; they reaffirmed an essential continuity between God and man that requires no miraculous revelation and redemption.

Evangelical Christianity insists that no sure revelation and no final revelation can evolve through cultural development; however progressive human culture may be at times, it still reflects human sinfulness and remains under divine judgment. Religious views are not to be commended simply because of their modernity or antiquity. Cultural revelation is, in fact, a misnomer; whether past or contemporary, culture is not a source of ultimate religious truth.

When twentieth-century historical developments showed that even modernism's judgments were culture-skewed and untenable, the transcultural claims for Judeo-Christian revelation gained fresh prominence. Instead of stressing God's immanence in cultural development, evangelicals pointed to the need for hearing God's Word that confronts mankind as a higher authority than experience, and that calls even culture at its best to answerability before the Lord of history. Evangelicals are fully aware that Scripture uses language and literary forms current in ancient times. But they deny that divine revelation is essentially conditioned by transitory cultural conceptions and patterns; they deny that the Bible teaches views of God, the cosmos, and human life that are simply borrowed from surrounding cultures. Evangelicals do not dispute the propriety of reconciling Christianity with any and all truth adduced by philosophy and science, or even of seeking temporary tactical relationships between Christianity and culture. But conformity of basic Christian tenets to the transitory *Zeitgeist* and espousal of the mores of the day, is another matter.

Modern scholars refused to seriously reinvestigate the Judeo-Christian option, however. As a result critical thinkers today espouse an even more pervasive and comprehensive culture-dependence of revelation than did their counterparts

earlier in this century. Phenomenological philosophers, for example, emphasize each knower's personal outlook and history, and his creative contribution to any and every cognitive claim. Humanistic anthropology and positivistic sociology likewise insist that all religious viewpoints are historically conditioned. The objective validity of Judeo-Christian theology is repudiated outright. Evangelical concern to avoid conforming God's transcultural revelation to either the missioner's or receptor's particular cultural heritage is considered irrelevant by this humanistic and positivistic theory; it belittles even the modernist's culture-conditioning of all religious views except its own, because the modernist who supposedly stands at the apex of evolutionary progress arms himself with scientific methodology and therefore presumes to escape the noose of conditioning. The current emphasis is that no one escapes culture conditioning; all biblical recipients of revelation, all who ever heard or translated that revelation, all who interpret it and who proclaim it to the world, as well as all who hear and would share the message with yet others are said to be in their perception and promulgation of external realities necessarily conditioned by various worldviews (cf. Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, New York, Orbis Books, 1979).

The result of this emphasis is a waning confidence in grammatico-historical interpretation and its goal of identifying a universally sharable meaning of the biblical text. Grammatico-historical exegesis cannot establish biblical theology as a comprehensive and authoritative summary of God's revelation, we are told, because the authority and meaning of the Gospel are not textual. Critics demean the longstanding evangelical emphasis on a universally valid theology expressed by all the biblical writers. We are asked to keep biblical representations in tension with the original writers' culturally-conditioned purpose, and to remember that our own perception of God's work, similarly culture-conditioned, must be continually reexpressed in new cultural forms as we address changing cultural contexts. We are asked, in short, to demythologize the evangelical notion that God's truth can be expressed in fixed doctrinal formulas or in credal statements, and to consider such formulations to be merely "pointers". We are to view Scripture as a call to faith; moreover — so it is said — we are to acknowledge faith as an inherent hermeneutical principle.

On the surface this bold summons to faith sounds heavenly-minded, but its result is non-evangelical and unorthodox, for in interpreting the Bible it strips us of any valid doctrinal system. While the supposed culture-conditioned and theologically-conflicting statements of the prophets and the apostles present us with a call to obedience in the Spirit they leave us nonetheless with merely a "confessional" or fallible testimonial witness. Successive cultures, we are

told, have impacted upon the ancient writers, bequeathing us a diversity of biblical theologies, none of them final. Evangelical confidence in the comprehensive unity and universal validity of Bible doctrine is declared to be uninformed and unenlightened. Neither prophetic revelation nor apostolic inspiration, we are told, nor Reformation exegesis nor contemporary evangelical proclamation nor receptor appropriation escapes the conforming influence of an environing culture upon man's creaturely conceptions.

A comprehensive conflict between two irreconcilable views is therefore inevitable. Neither view denies that man through the ages has been culture-dependent, or that human culture notably conditions the religious history of mankind. No indictment of the culturally-conditioned world religions is more devastating than Paul's letter to the Romans (1 : 21 ff.). Biblical prophets and apostles strenuously warn even Jews and Christians of the perilous consequences of culturally compromising their special heritage of redemptive revelation. But the prophets and apostles also insist, as Clark Pinnock remarks, that the inspired Scriptures and the finality of Jesus Christ "provide an Archimedian point in the flux of the human situation against which the flow of history may be measured and evaluated" (*Biblical Revelation*, Chicago, Moody Press, 1971, p. 128).

But the new hermeneutic stresses that historical understanding demands a wholly different intellection of the past. It declares the whole revelatory and hermeneutical process to be culture-bound, whether it be divine disclosure at its loftiest heights, New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament, apostolic proclamation to the world, or even our understanding of the whole. Given this culture-relatedness of the Bible and of all human history, how can the scriptural teaching be considered authoritative, we are asked. According to the new hermeneutic the way to discover the decisive meaning of past texts for our times is by existential immediacy, that is, by internal awareness and the contemporary recipient's response and creative contribution.

This approach is now often linked with an appeal to Scripture's divine "intention" and with an emphasis on the biblical writer's inner "intention". But if an ancient text has no fixed verbal meaning, or if its meaning is said to differ from age to age and from culture to culture, then the notion of understanding past texts is senseless. If external reality is not rationally comprehensible, moreover, and meaning is but internal and subjective, then one could not even pursue an ancient author's "intention" inasmuch as our historical understanding, we are told, creatively conditions whatever we affirm. If we have access to "divine intention" independent of ancient texts it is misleading to associate such meaning with a discovery of the author's real

intention. It is but a hoax on logical consistency and a delusion to say that the sense of the text consists simply of its "relevance" for me on the assumption that what it means in encountering me in my cultural understanding is the only sense the text truly has, and that this sense is normative for other persons, and moreover echoes the inner intention of the original author.

The New Testament writers did not impose arbitrary meanings on the Old Testament writings, but claim merely to illumine their original and intended sense. No doubt each passing generation finds biblical elements specially significant for its own intellectual and cultural context. When the new hermeneutic emphasizes that the Bible should speak to us wherever we stand, no evangelical Christian will withhold a hearty 'Amen'. But unless its declared significance is intrinsic to the meaning of the text interpretation has given way to spiritualizing. E. D. Hirsch Jr. remarks that "the point which ought to be grasped clearly by the critic is that a text cannot be made to speak to us until what it says has been understood ... The literary text (in spite of the semimystical claims made for its uniqueness) does not have a special ontological status which somehow absolves the reader from the demands universally imposed by all linguistic texts of every description" (*Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, p. 210). The meaning is not an "immediate given" and must be founded on objective interpretation. To insist on the present relevance of a text is therefore one thing; to insist that its current vitality depends upon a rejection of objectively valid meaning is quite another. A text may have a somewhat different significance for different persons or times, or even at different moments in a person's life, but if the text itself has no inherent objective meaning its import on any and every occasion is entirely subjective; in that case it is intrinsically meaningless and can just as appropriately signify its contrary or contradictory.

If by a culture-conditioned text we mean not only language and forms of communication, but also intellectual content, then the author's verbal intention cannot escape authorial fallibility, since culture-dependent teaching lacks finality. Only an interpreter possessing a truer grasp of the subject matter can say that an author's meaning is either incomplete, distorted or false. But the dogma of culture-conditionedness automatically rules out such claims to comprehensive knowledge and transcendent truth. A critic would need to claim not simply more knowledge than the ancient author had, both of his intention and of the culture of his day, in order to establish the incompleteness or fallibility of his thought; to insist on the culture-dependence of a text, and especially of all texts, the critic would need absolute knowledge. But if the critic is no less culture-conditioned than the original author, then all

distinctions drain into relativity.

The current champion of universal culture-conditioning routinely implies that his own statements are somehow exempt from the qualifications that attach to other's views. He refuses to apply the rule of limited comprehension to dispute his own dogma about comprehensive culture-distortion. But since he disallows the modernist assumption, that evolutionary progress and scientific method lift him to a transcendent status that he strips away from Judeo-Christian revelation, what culture-transcending platform has the advocate of the new hermeneutic for peering over and beyond the great wall of culture?

According to Martin Heidegger differences of cultural and historical epochs preclude any identity and continuity of meaning; personal significance presupposes the creative contribution of the knower. Heidegger's followers stress that the nature of time sets off past time as ontologically alien to the present. On this claim they ground the historicity of understanding, and insist that past meaning cannot be understood in the present. In that case, neither the modernists nor the evangelicals, nor the more radical secular critics, can recapture the authentic meaning of the Bible.

Heidegger's followers concede that living contemporaries escape the destructive consequences of this alien ontology of time; the living can intelligibly communicate among themselves in a common language. But if a time-gap between generations involves discontinuity of meaning, why then not also the passing of a moment or of many moments? And if the passing of a few moments need not involve ontological alienation, then why should and must the lapse of many moments do so? If a time-span necessarily eradicates common meaning, post-Heideggerians had better not rely on books to convey their claims from one generation to the next. In fact, even the effort to convey shared meaning to our present generation disputes a definitive role for historicity and personal creativity. The theory itself must be false in order to be true, and, if true, must be false. Heidegger's philosophy is often said to be antimetaphysical or nonmetaphysical, but it is as much metaphysical as is Aristotelianean, and no less debatable.

The sociological relativizing of revealed truth and values has been even more pervasively influential than has Heidegger's historicizing of meaning, for it implies that all cultural values and beliefs are of equal worth, and in no case final and absolute. But if we evaluate all cultural claims by the relativity theory championed by secular humanists and other naturalists, we have no criteria for disputing the pretensions of any culture. Nor have we any way of validating the pretensions of modern humanistic culture when it arbitrarily elevates its theory of cultural-relativity into an absolute. The historicist and

humanist alike should be reminded that the insistence on universal cultural fallibility most appropriately begins at home, and that it would be the part of wisdom first to explore the culture-conditionedness of the critic who somehow inconsistently confers privileged supremacy on his own philosophical theory. If all that we say, and all that anyone else says, is culture-permeated, one wonders why any person would presume to have a decisive and definitive word for any other person. The anthropologist who insists on the culture-conditionedness even of divine revelation, yet professes to tell us the real truth about the whole historical drama, should alert us to pretensions of a new Montanism. We had best beware of a guide who on the premise that he alone has visual credentials for identifying sight, insists that all humans are blind. This ready disposition to impose cultural-historical conditioning on universal human experience stems, in fact, from uncritical culture-dependence in a generation addicted to historical relativism. The verdict that cultural influences have so skewed biblical teaching that it cannot serve as a standard for judging other views, has subtly prepared the way for the stealthy entrenchment of transitory relativism. Theological pluralism that depends on relativistic theory has no normative focus, yet while many theologians are now unsure what it any longer means to "do theology," some sociologists and anthropologists are presumptively stepping into this void. But if theology by definition cannot transcend culture, then no alternative way of "doing theology" — not even the gnosis of the humanist — can provide a culture-transcendent verdict.

If all truth and meaning are culturally conditioned, moreover, no basis remains for a selective application that exempts certain preferred biblical specifics from cultural conditioning. If we elevate culture-conditioning into a formative principle, and insist that biblical theology does not present itself independently of a culture-relative context, then the principle of relativity to culture applies not only to this or that isolated passage — whether about the seriousness of sexual sins or the role of women in the church — but also to scriptural teaching that "in Christ there is neither male nor female," or that we are to love God with our whole being and our neighbors and ourselves, or that it is sinful to covet a neighbor's wife or possessions. It will not do to exalt certain doctrines as the special strength of biblical religion if we simultaneously dismiss other teachings on the basis of pervasive cultural dependence. Without universal truths there can be no authentic Christian theology in any culture; there may be so-called "relevant theological emphases," but not universally valid theology. Without culture-transcendent propositional truth, "being a Christian" is itself compatible with unlimited

theological diversity, a diversity that contradicts every orthodox affirmation in both the Scriptures and in the historic ecumenical creeds.

Preoccupied with evangelistic concerns, many evangelicals often lack the intellectual discipline to engage in theological debate over the foundations of religious knowledge. Anxious to avoid merely traditional, unscholarly or reactionary verdicts in the present hermeneutical debate, they easily become vulnerable to all sorts of unnecessary concessions. Intense sociological stresses readily shape their commitments on issues ranging from political revolution to the propriety of homosexuality. Ecclesiastical pressures on the clergy often promote conformity to officially-espoused views.

Orthodox evangelicals reject the premise that contemporary culture is a source or norm of revelational truth; rather, as they see it, culture is a social context in which transcendent revelation is to be applied and appropriated. Concessive or mediating evangelicals are often highly ambivalent. While they refuse to give full sweep to the secular principle of culture-conditioned revelation, and insist on at least some transcultural revelatory element, they sometimes rather broadly define this transcultural factor as "the Gospel" and shift primary attention away from the scriptural record. Many nonevangelicals, moreover, insist on the transcendent reality of God, but defend their position on other than scriptural grounds. Because concessive evangelicals and secular scholars alike reject the objective authority of Scripture as a canon of inspired propositional teaching; both lack a stable basis for asserting religious knowledge-claims.

Compromised evangelicalism expresses a remarkably diverse evaluation of Scripture and retains or rejects assorted elements of the Bible. In keeping with frontier trends in biblical criticism, a number of concessive evangelicals approve hermeneutical compromises that earlier Christian leaders resisted or rejected; at the same time they retain many traditional positions on grounds other than the authority of biblical teaching. Their emphasis on biblical authority rather than on biblical inerrancy thus becomes a diversionary tactic, inasmuch as they disallow the objective authority of the Bible.

All evangelicals acknowledge that Scripture conveys divine revelation in a concrete cultural context in a particular historical situation in language that is culturally-related. They agree, moreover, that the text does not automatically impart its meaning but requires an interpreter familiar with the language, someone who mentally constructs the meaning of the given semantic units. The process of interpretation, it is also agreed, involves an interpreter who has both some preunderstanding and presuppositions.

But beyond these agreements differences become apparent. Some evangelical

exegetes contend that because revelation is 'incarnational', that is, given in human history and language, it is therefore fully steeped in the cultural context of its time. God's "accommodation" to "culturally-conditioned" language, we are told, means that God speaks errantly even in Scripture. Yet if modern theologians can employ human language to tell us what is truly the case in matters of religious epistemology it is strange, indeed, that God could not have done so. We are told, moreover, that God used the "thought-forms" of ancient cultures; this confusing term obscures the fact that at creation God himself universally gifted man with the categories of reason and morality. We have no reason to insist that today's forms of thought and laws of logic differ essentially from those of the past.

Critics all too often forget that the meaning of a biblical message is not derived by a simple word-by-word transfer of the linguistic sense of some culturally-entrenched vocabulary. Meaning is extracted, rather, from the logical context in which Scripture or any other verbal communication is set. Words in themselves have no meaning but are symbols that gain meaning through conventional use; only when words are used in sentences does their specific meaning become clear.

A term of Bangalore commentators, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden among them, contend that words gain their meaning from the culture in which they stand, and that culture necessarily alters the meaning and truth of words. They do not, however, apply this rule retroactively to their own assertions, to which they apparently attach transcultural significance and truth.

The fact is, that words derive their intended sense neither simply from their cultural use nor from etymology, but from the universe of discourse in which they stand, that is, from sentences or propositions. James Barr's comments on the relation of language and culture are appropriate here. Concluding his book on *Biblical Words for Time* (London, SCM Press Ltd., 2nd rev. ed., 1969, pp. 206 f.), Barr writes: "I take it that theology is not identical with the environing culture, and thus the Hebrew-speaking culture of (let us say) the time of Jeremiah was not identical with the theology of that prophet. The *Words* of the language, however, words like *love* and *God* and *time*, were common property to Jeremiah and the 'false' prophets, just as they later were to Paul and his opponents or to John and the Gnostics. It was the things they said with these words that were different." We may further illustrate the point that the same general culture can be used to support two very different philosophies and religions by noting that Maimonides, Aquinas and Spinoza all used Latin, but to express highly divergent positions. Barr continues: "If theology wishes to consider itself as other than identical

with the culture in which it is set, it is fatal for it to maintain that all those who speak the same language think in the same way, or to maintain positions which tacitly imply this. Conversely, it is possible in a certain sense to maintain the unity of language and culture in such a way that one speaking the language will share the meanings which are part of the culture; but if one does this, and if one also takes the word as the unity of meaning and looks for context-free word-meanings, the meanings so discovered will in many cases be theologically equivocal."

God doubtless communicated his revelatory message to prophets and apostles within the limits of their conceptual comprehension, although at times they may not have fully grasped its full significance. He addressed them, moreover, within their cultural milieu, whose worldview and lifeview they shared except as prior revelation had modified their perspective. But it is misleading and unjustifiable to say that divine revelation is limited to the cultural outlook. Today's exaggerated emphasis on contextualization reflects the influence of the social scientists, particularly of anthropologists, sociologists of religion and communications theorists and technicians, and poses some note-worthy dangers for theology. Simply because revelation is adressed within one's culture and is to be expressed and interpreted within that culture does not mean that divine revelation must be conformed to that culture. Culture is a complex of shared beliefs and customs, laws and morals. But to allow the prevailing cultural outlook to fix the limits of revelatory meaning and truth violates the scriptural emphasis on transcendent divine revelation.

Nicholas Wolterstorff claims that the inspired writers to whom God conveyed his word "held the beliefs current in their culture: a primitive cosmology, a primitive psychology and physiology, characteristic botanical and zoological information" ("Canon and Criterion," in *The Reformed Journal*, October, 1969, p. 12). Yet it would be remarkable if David learned nothing from Moses that would modify a primitive cosmology and primitive psychology, and Isaiah nothing from Moses and David, and Ezra and Nehemiah nothing from the prophets before them. According to Wolterstorff God spoke by the inspired prophets by speech "which reveals a culturally conditioned frame of beliefs" (ibid., p. 12). But if the vocabulary used by the prophets to declare God's Word was incapable of conveying supracultural meaning and beliefs, then as centuries pass and cultures change the belief-content of revelation also is subject to change.

In their day the inspired writers no doubt personally adhered to the prevalent outlook where revelation did not impinge on cultural concerns. The prophets and apostles were not divinely endowed with a systematically-

formulated world-and-lifeview alternative to their own cultural inheritance; in many respects they retained the limited and often fallacious theories of their time. But they often sharply condemned cultural principles and practises in the light of revelation, and where they expressly approved these they did so on the ground not of cultural tradition or heritage but of revelation. Where the writers do not teach cosmology, they speak in the common idiom of their day. The earth is said to stand secure on pillars (1 Sam. 2 : 8), for example, and Paul is caught up into the "third heaven" (2 Cor. 12 : 2). Such references do not appeal to divine revelation to accredit a particular cosmology. Scripture does not impose outmoded theories of the structure and nature of the universe as doctrine. Pinnock notes that the phrase "heaven above ... earth beneath, and water under the earth" is a Hebrew expression of totality (*op. cit.*, p. 72). If it is wrong for Christians to infer that the earth is round from the reference in Psalm 19 to the sun arching from one end of the earth to the other, why must the writers be thought to teach cosmological theory in passages that seem to suggest that the earth is flat, or that the universe is three-tiered? Must God limit himself to the "language meanings" of one's particular culture in order to convey revelational truth? In the culture context of the ancient Near East the very term God surely meant something far different for the Hebrews than it did for the Philistines.

Where Scripture didactically touches on scientific matters it does not teach error. It often uses the everyday language of sense experience that technical scientists still use when they speak to their families and even to their peers. Surely we moderns do not affirm a pre-Copernican cosmology, when we speak of the sun 'rising' or 'setting'. Had the ancient writers expressed themselves in the technical language of later scientific theory, their thought would have been baffling indeed to their contemporaries. To the tentative scientific theory of which later epoch, moreover, should the writers have committed themselves?

On the surface it seems sensible to argue that since we modern receptors of the message of revelation are culture conditioned, and since all translators of the message were culture-conditioned, it is therefore futile to insist that the teaching of Scripture is not culture-conditioned. But this line of argument has far-reaching implications. There is a great difference between inerrant teaching and errant teaching. Not even inerrant translation and inerrant interpretation of errant teaching would help us much. If Scripture is inerrant it remains the norm of truth over all its interpreters. Why should we think that those who now strenuously insist that prophetic teaching is fallible are infallible?

The culture-conditioning of translator and interpreter does not really require what the new hermeneutics maintain, namely, that every culture and generation must do its own exegesis anew. Relevant cultural application is clearly and obviously necessary; the expositor must always seek to apply revelation to dynamic cultural parallels. But if no *fixed* meaning exists from culture to culture and from generation to generation, then no decisive, authentic and authoritative meaning exists either for our time and place or for any other.

Samuel and Sugden deny that "Scripture gives one message which has already been sufficiently described by Christians in other parts of the world", one message which Indian Christians need only to teach and apply. This statement is highly ambiguous. If the Bangalore scholars mean only that Indians must search the Scriptures lest they miss its special application to Indian conceptual prejudices and patterns of life, we would agree. But they illustrate their point by citing Luther who formulated justification by faith "in his particular situation of an individual monk seeking salvation." The cultural backdrop of Luther's experience was obviously different from that of the apostle Paul and from ours. The pivotal question remains, however, whether the Pauline doctrine is valid universally, and whether its universal validity is eroded simply because Luther expounded it in a different culture-context. By their phrasing Samuel and Sugden seem to cloud the New Testament conception that the Christian faith has been "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3, RSV).

Samuel and Sugden insist, in fact, not only that Scripture can be understood only in its cultural context, but also that it conveys no static universal eternal message. Their supportive arguments (presumably intended to vindicate a static universal eternal counter-message) are weak. The Old Testament command "an eye for an eye", they say, can be misunderstood to justify vengeance unless we realize that in its original culture setting the purpose of *lex talionis* was to set the limits of punishment. But that approach hardly disproves — indeed, contrary to Samuel and Sugden, it actually supports — the emphasis that God revealed the static universal eternal message that it is wicked for humans to exceed the divinely fixed limits of retribution. The need to properly understand the real intention of a text is no proof that it lacks fixed universal meaning; where no such fixed meaning exists for a text, no normative meaning either for our time or for the time the text was first given could be assigned to it.

The issue in debate is not whether every verse in the Bible contains a universal and eternal message, but whether the Bible objectively tells the truth. The issue is not whether knowledge of an ancient culture may not on

occasion spare us from misunderstanding the text, or whether the prejudices of modern culture may not on occasion betray us into misunderstanding it. The issue, rather, is whether, as Samuel and Sugden contend, "we must find God's revelation in the total cultural setting of Scripture" rather than in the propositional revelation of Scripture *per se*. If by the "total cultural setting" they mean transcultural meaning and truth, they express themselves in a highly confusing manner. Recent emphasis on divine accommodation regards Old Testament revelation as accommodated to the culture in which it came, regards the apostles as receiving and interpreting it in further accommodation to their culture, regards us in turn as hearing and appropriating revelation in additional accommodation to our own culture, and those to whom we proclaim the message as responding in a still further accommodation of content to their particular cultural situation.

When Samuel and Sugden tell us that "what God said to Abraham and Amos will have meaning for us if we first find what meaning it had for them," they seem to ask us to do what on their own premises is impossible; if all understanding is culture-conditioned, we can glimpse what the inspired prophets say only through the lens of accommodation to our own culture, and not in an accommodation to theirs. Samuel and Sugden filter every strand of prophetic teaching in its original reception, subsequent translation, and current appropriation through accommodation to culture; this accommodation so pervades their entire message that no objective possibility remains for distinguishing what transcends cultural accommodation from what does not.

Emphasis on cultural illumination of the scriptural text assumes, moreover, that we have a great treasury of knowledge about ancient cultures for illuminating the biblical texts. The fact is, that for many centuries the Bible illumined ancient cultures much more significantly than those cultures illumined the Bible. Abraham opens a wide window on life in Sodom and Gomorrah, the Book of Judges on the chaotic society of its day, and Amos on the condition of the nations in his time. Biblical critics who moved exegetically from culture to the Bible, rather than from the Bible to culture, routinely distrusted the biblical sources in the absence of parallel secular data, even though archaeological studies continually supported the amazing trustworthiness of Scripture. Critics once boldly disbelieved the existence of the Hittites, the existence of writing in Moses' day, the glories of the Solomic empire, the existence of wisdom-literature in Solomon's time, the Hebrew exile in Babylon, and much else, simply because the Bible for many years was the only sourcebook from ancient times that could shed light on obscure cultures.

In many instances literary fragments discovered by archaeology give much

less information about the remote past than do the biblical writings; in any event, archaeological discoveries still pertain to only a small part of the biblical data. However limited or extensive our knowledge of the ancient past may be, we have no reason to think that the biblical writers knew no more about their cultural context than we do. They not only knew their cultural context in depth, as a milieu whose life they shared in many ways, but they were also profoundly aware that many aspects of that society fell under the stern judgment of the self-revealing God.

Samuel and Sugden do, in fact, insist that God did not limit his revelation to ancient culture; revelation, they say, "has resources which continually evaluate and judge" its accommodation to culture. These resources they call "the prophetic seed in Scripture." This prophetic seed "does not contain new revelation" but is "the flowering of God's original revelation in a new context, aspects of which were perhaps dimmed in the process of accommodation. Our task is to let these seeds flower in our context, just as we see the different seeds of God's one revelation flowering in different ways in the biblical contexts."

But if no past "seeds" are a pure strain identifiable independently of cultural conditioning, and if in presently identifying the content of such previously conditioned revelation we fall victim to additional contemporary conditioning, then on what basis do Samuel and Sugden propose to reintroduce a static frozen seed? Are they as theological guides somehow exempt from the limitation they impute to prophets and apostles? Did not Jesus rebuke his disciples for not believing "everything the prophets have spoken." (Luke 24 : 25)? Do Samuel and Sugden propagate a supercultural hermeneutical system? And were they in fact able to distinguish a pure seed from supposed cultural chaff in Scripture, would not the hermeneutical limitations they arbitrarity have imposed on us lead inevitably to our perverting any such objective biblical truth?

Samuel and Sugden tell us that in interpreting Scripture we must "move from the particular to the universal" and not assume "a pre-formulated universal." "The scripture is concrete and particular and calls for obedience. It is not universal and abstract calling for intellectual appreciation." How the Bangalore exegetes ever reconcile such claims with biblical teaching from Genesis through the Gospels is hard to imagine. Surely the abstract commands "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20 : 3) and "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22 : 37, NEB) involve the intellect, and are intended to be universal.

From limited particulars, moreover, we shall never arrive at a true universal. But universal truth seems to mean little to Samuel and Sugden for, as they see it, God is more interested in sheer obedience than in the validity of truth. Such an anti-intellectual concept of revelation is more aligned with volition-oriented European neoorthodoxy than with orthodox evangelical theism. Sugden and Samuel tell us that Jesus challenged "those who obeyed the frozen static revelation of God," that Jesus does not "promulgate a universal truth" but provides "concrete application" of what love implies. But, we reply, Jesus does not declare the scripturally-given law of God to be misleading but rather condemns the misconceptions of the scribes. Jesus exemplifies what obedience to the biblically given law of God permanently means and requires. Who, moreover, would deny the universality of such teaching by Jesus as "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14 : 6)?

Evangelical exegetes have always insisted, of course, on the importance of a knowledge of the cultural and historical context of the biblical writings. They have long championed grammatical-historical exegesis to avoid allegorical and other fanciful misconceptions of meaning. But exegetes who think it necessary to state the truth-content of revelation in divergent cultural forms, and not in its original normative setting, consider grammatical-historical exegesis too rigid. Preoccupation with contextual history and culture can surely frustrate the "absolute transcendental content of Scripture." as David Lim warns (unpublished paper, "Cultural Sensitivity in Hermeneutics," p. 9). But, asks Lim, does not God, who revealed his inscripturated Word "in ... world-views of Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultures ... intend us to interpret His word in different ... world-views ... (with His guiding presence)?" The question deserves more than a hurried answer. Lim implies that inspired Scripture is given in the philosophical context of the religious or secular world-views of the prophetic and apostolic times. Does it not rather, we would ask, address those world-views in a vital way? If Scripture is delivered in a cultural straightjacket, how does one shed one's own skin in order to identify a supposed transcultural content? If human meaning requires that the supercultural is "*always* understood in terms of the historical being of culture-bound men (interpreters and audience alike)" then how can we any longer speak of an initial meaningful prophetic or apostolic supercultural or transcultural message or content? If the differences between biblical authors extends to their imposition of various cultural presuppositions and beliefs, then it seems futile to insist on a comprehensively unified biblical theology as a system of sharable truth and values. Different cultures, after all, perceive reality in competitive and even contradictory ways, and the scriptural perceptions, no less than their ancient alternatives, must then be seen as assorted and divergent culturally-conditioned perspectives. If the supercultural is always perceived, expressed and heard in one's own cultural categories and terms, and by this we mean not only one's own language but also a non-universal type of conception and truth, then Lim's own effort to convey to others the sense of what he himself says is futile.

Lim maintains that "exegetes and expositors cannot see the 'plain meaning of Scriptures,' but can come only with interpretational reflexes which are conditioned by their cultural backgrounds" (cf. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*). But if our cultural background so conditions hermeneutical reflexes that we cannot discern or tell what is objectively true, then neither can Lim do so — nor can Kraft to whom he alludes — and we ought to treat his verdict on exegesis *cum grano saltis*-insofar as it claims universal validity.

The issue here is not whether humans as cultural beings can escape their creatureliness, for obviously they cannot. Nor is there any sound basis to believe that we modern interpreters — even the most able and profound — can fully avoid selectively screening biblical truth. Scripture always remains normative over its exposition by a culture-environed exegete to culture-mired recipients. But if the original revelation is conveyed in "cultural thought forms" and not in the form of meaningful supercultural teaching, and the truths, principles and values of prophetic-apostolic revelation must be regarded as embedded in transitory worldviews and as subject to revision, then it is futile to speak of an original authorial intention, meaning or content that transcends culture. One can hardly rediscover "the meaning" of a supercultural revelation for each changing culture if, in fact, the meaning of that so-called revelation was from the outset not truly supercultural; and if no basis remains for distinguishing cultural from transcultural aspects of a revelation that is declared enculturated by predefinition.

While many evangelicals disallow Neoprotestant religious syncretism, they nonetheless profess the need to contextualize theology. But they fail to produce credible models of Christian contextualized theology that preserve the Gospel and the authority of Scripture. Contextualization is a proper concern if or where proclamation or exposition of the meaning of the Bible may be misconstrued because of a changed historical context. When C. Rene Padilla proposes "a new reading of the Gospel from within each particular historical situation" ("The Contextualization of the Gospel," paper read at the 10th general committee of IFES in July, 1979, in Hurdal Verk, Norway) and calls for an open-ended reading of Scripture in which its meaning comes not from the logical context of Scripture itself but from hermeneutical interaction with

the historical situation, one must wonder whether contextualization does not, in fact, confuse its own proper norm by subordinating Scripture to culture. All too often inherent in pride of culture is an unquestioning confidence in the intellectual prejudices distinctive of one's time. While Padilla's intentions are otherwise, less evangelical expositors utter the plea for indigenization and contextualization as but the first wave of a larger campaign to hold evangelical faith at bay while encouraging nonevangelical and Neoprotestant alternatives. Despite its Asian roots, Biblical theism is then deplored as "Greek" or "Western rationalism" while Marxist or existentialist motifs, although speculatively rooted in Europe, are hailed and approved as authentically Latin American or Asian. If the cultural context is what supplies the hermeneutical principle for interpreting the Bible and the Gospel, then it would seem that history has become revelatory and the Bible simply relative. The cultural context may and often does pinpoint the special relevance of particular biblical passages, but if that context determines the meaning of the Gospel have we not then lost the primary and objective authority of Scripture?

The fact that revelation is conceptualized and intelligibly formulated by recipients who share one or another form of culture does not of itself warrent certain commonly held inferences. For Leslie Dewart the truth of Christianity is not eternal and transcultural, but historical, and can be transformed into successive cultural phenomena (*The Future of Belief: Theism in a World Come of Age*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1966, p. 121). The prejudices that accommodate such a restatement of the Christian faith issue from modern secular culture conditioned by historicism and relativism. To his credit, Dewart sees more consistently than many concessive evangelicals where the premise of a culture-conditioned faith can lead. But he dogmatically denies that revealed religion has any valid conceptual content either in its original form or in its significance for any and all cultures; he contends instead that Christianity is an experience capable of divergent reconceptualization in different cultures.

Even where we know a great deal about ancient cultures, present-day cultural prejudices often influence expositors to manipulate their appeal to culture-dependence in such a way that Scripture may be seen to support privately cherished emphases. The current issue of the ministerial role of women is a case in point. Although Christ and the Bible ennobled women far above their status in non-biblical society, Western Christianity for many years demoted the creative role of women in church and society because of the prevailing male-dominant culture pattern that influenced religious convictions more than did the Bible. Today a reactionary tendency promotes a feminist

libertarianism whose inspiration just as that of male chauvenism comes not from Scripture but from the secular mood. Culture-conditioned interpreters who promote contemporary feminism and charge that the Bible itself is culture-infected merely compound these secular misconceptions of subjection and liberation. We hear it said that the apostle Paul's Jewish rabbinic inheritance excluded any feminine role in priestly ministry and otherwise conditioned his doctrine concerning the place of women. Yet both in his prechristian years at Tarsus and in his spiritual encounters in Athens and Ephesus, Saul of Tarsus was also aware of pagan cults that granted women a prominent role. Douglas Feaver observes that in the Athenian cult 95% of the priestly assistants were female (Athenian Priesthoods: "Their Historical Development," in Yale Classical Studies, 1956?). It could well be that Paul's stipulation of the role of women in the church was more a rejection of Greek cultural practises than a perpetuation of Jewish prejudices, and grounded in revelation more that in accommodation, Paul after all stressed that Gentile Christians did not need to become cultural Jews in order to become Christian, whereas Peter held — until Paul corrected him — that Gentiles could enter the kingdom of God only through the door of Hebrew customs and ritual. Paul champions the equality of both men and women, but he also brings both under the authority of the revealed will and purpose of God. He lifts the discussion of priesthood not only above the theme of masculinity and feminity, but also above that of the hierarchical status of symbolic mediators in order to underscore the universal priestly status of the entire believing community (1 Cor. 6 : 19). He sets both the termination of the male cultic priestly line and the restriction of the woman's role in the larger context of the priesthood of all believers.

Instead of conforming to cultural prejudices, the Bible strikingly and repeatedly departs from the contextual culture on major issues. In an age when pagans worshipped the planets and believed in many gods, the Genesis creation account, for example, focuses on the one sovereign God and identifies the entire universe as his creation. If this now frequently neglected narrative were to be discovered for the first time during a present-day archaeological excavation on Mount Sinai, the finding would be considered more significant than either the Rosetta Stone or the Dead Sea Scrolls. Consider, too, that in an age when Greeks wholly excluded the bodily resurrection of mankind, and when even Jews confined the hope of the resurrection to the future eschatological age, Jesus' followers affirmed his third-day resurrection and staked their lives on its factuality. In a day when almost all Jews professed salvation through personal keeping of the law, the apostles proclaimed salvation on the

sole ground of the substitutionary death and resurrection of Messiah.

Never does a biblical writer state that what he teaches as revelation derives in whole or in part from the cultural milieu. The book of Ecclesiastes deliberately mirrors contemporary beliefs; Job's friends parrot the popular theological misconceptions of their time; the Apostle Paul identifies what even "one of your own poets" concedes. But when biblical writers speak in the name of Yahweh, they never claim Yahweh's endorsement of cultural preconceptions, but rather frequently affirm his displeasure with them.

When modern interpreters declare biblical doctrine to be culture-dependent, or even judge it to be right or wrong, they move from interpretaion to philosophical evaluation. The modern critic who offers to deliver the biblical writer from supposed enslavement to an ancient culture about which we have little independent knowledge, all too often forces upon the writer a current culture prejudice that he, the critic, himself brings to the text. Valid interpretation can hardly be achieved if one approaches the text with an advance assumption that those conditioned by contemporary culture can more truly say what a past writer has said because that writer was conditioned by his culture. Modern biblical criticism all too readily assigns a larger role to culture in the original formation of Scripture than it does to the Spirit of inspiration and confers on the modern critic, who covertly accommodates the Bible to alien beliefs, a special pneumatic capacity for defining revelational content. Pleas for enriching Christian faith by the insights of contemporary culture more often than not elevate modern prejudices into a source of prescriptive judgment on Christian doctrine and ethics.

〔講 演 要 旨〕

今世紀，啓示と文化の問題は神学における最重要問題の一つとして浮上し，両者の関係については諸説が相次いだ。

キリスト教は，文化を単に人間の社会的活動の副産物程度のものとしてではなく，あくまでも創造論との関連においてみてゆこうとする。また，啓示の問題においても，文化を神の啓示の源泉とはみなさないが，啓示伝達上の不可避なコンテキストとみる。たしかに，予言者たちの活動が示唆しているように，罪の介在ゆえに，文化を単純に肯定することはしない。罪ゆえに信仰と文化との間にはある種の非連続さえ存在している。しかしながら，神の啓示は，時代の言語，文学様式，思考様式を媒介して与えられたことも事実である。それゆえに，われわれが文化をどのように理解し，どのように位置づけるかということは，きわめて重要な課題である。

さて，今日，宗教の成立とその理解は徹頭徹尾時代の文化によって制約づけられるという主張がとみに強くなってきており，それとの関連で“コンテクスチュアリゼーション論”（Contextualization）が注目を浴びている。この論議は，聖書の無謬性の問題だけではなく，命題的啓示，文化をつらぬく超越的啓示の可能性の問題にも深くかかわってくる。

振り返ってみると，海外宣教活動が活潑化してきた今世紀の初頭において，多くの宣教師たちは福音の中に自らの西洋文化を混入するという間違いを犯してしまった。他方，被宣教地の人々の中には，福音を自分たちの古来の土着思想に迎合するという誤りを犯す者もいた。

キリスト教は古代の原始的な文化の産物であるとみた＜自由主義キリスト教＞は，進化思想と経験論的科学的方法とを内容とする一時期の西洋文化を絶対化，規範化するという誤りを犯した。その結果は啓示の独自性，絶対性の喪失となった。考えてみると，彼らの立場，つまり文化的内在論と進歩の思想に立つなら，彼らの立場も絶えず流動進歩する流れの一コマ，一部とならざるをえないわけだが，奇怪なことに，彼らは自己の考え方や立場だけをその相対性から免除してしまった。だがこの立場は今世紀大きくゆさぶられた。

代わって登場したヨーロッパの＜新正統主義＞は，自由主義の根本的欠陥を正しく批判し，啓示と救いの超越的側面を強調した。しかしながら，この新正統主義も，聖書の客観的規範性の否定に立ちつつ，結局はヨーロッパの実存思想という一時期の文化の反映ではないかと批判する一部の自由主義者の反論には注目すべきものがある。

今日，特に流通している見解は，認識主体の創造的貢献を重視しながら過去に対する（古代のテキストなど）まったく新しい理解の立場を主張する＜新解釈学＞と，絶対的究極的価値の存在を否定し，すべての文化は平等の価値を有するとみなす文化的相対主義を根幹とする社会科学に影響された立場である。前者の新解釈学は，聖書記者たちの意図を重視すると主張するが，根本においてはハイデッガーなどの影響を受けて登場した実存論的解釈の立場である。だが，聖書のテキストは固定した客観的な言語上の意味を持たず，さらに，テキストの意味はそれぞれの文化的環境，時代時代において実存的に異なるなら，過去のテキスト理解は無意味化しないだろうか。もしも，テキストの意味は内的実存的であるとするなら，著者たちの意図そのものの発見も困難になってしまうのではないだろうか。聖書はわれわれの生きた状況に語りかけるという新解釈学の主張には大賛成であるが，その場合に提示される意味がテキストの意味に根本的に根ざすものでなければ，スピリチュアリゼーションの危険，あるいは新モンタニズムの危険を避けられなくなるのではないか。まさにテキストの固有な客観的意味の是非，そして歴史的文法的解釈法の妥当性が，問題となっているといえる。

次に福音派内部の＜調停的福音主義＞の立場に注目したい。最初に概評を申しあげると，この立場はしっかりとした福音的な立場の認識論を欠いているために，新解釈学の中にみとめられる危険の中に足を踏み込んでいるようにみえる。その一例をインドの福音的な聖書学者であるV．サミュエルやC．サグデンの主張に，また米国カルビン大学のN．ウォルターストッフの聖書解釈論にみることができる。サミュエルとサグデンは文化的相対主義には与しないが，聖書理解における主知主義や客観主義の立場をさけつつ，啓示の文化への受肉（原初の伝達，聖書翻訳，今日的受容の三局面での）に深い関心を抱いている。そしてそれを実存論的方向で展開しようとする。なかでも中心的な問題は文化的制約のそれである。彼らによると，聖書はその成立からみると文化的に制約づけられている。従ってある種の可謬性，相対性は避けられない。しかし，“テキストことば”から区別される“力ことば”に比較されるような＜聖書における予言的種子＞とよびうるある種の超文化的恒久的なものが聖書の中に存在している。この予言的種子は時代時代における福音の文化への順応，適用の正否を批判する力でもある。われわれのつとめは，この種子をわれわれの今日的状況の中で具体化し実存的に花を咲かせることである，と主張される。だが，まさに彼らのいう＜予言的種子＞を客観的に同定確保することが困難であるところに，この立場の最大の難点がある。

福音派内部におけるもう一つの注目すべき動きは，宣教と神学の＜コンテクスチュアリゼーション＞である。ラテン・アメリカの福音派の代表的論者であるR．パディーラは，シンクレティズムに対しては厳しく警戒しているが，聖書の意味を聖書のロジカル・コンテキストからではなく，読者が置かれている具体的な文化的・歴史的状況との解釈学的交渉の中から絶えず新しくつかみなおしてゆく立場を強調している。コンテクスチュアリゼーションは今日大事な課題であるが，特定の文化的・歴史的コンテキストが解釈原理にまで高められると，特定の文化や歴史的状況が啓示的とみなされ，逆に聖書は相対化されるという事態が起ってくる。十分気をつけなければならないことは，アジア生まれの聖書の有神論がギリシヤ的西洋的と批判排斥される一方，西欧生まれの実存主義やマルキシズムがその解釈学的過程や操作の中でラテン・アメリカ本来のもの，アジアの土着的なものとしてすりかえられる危険である。また，聖書記者たちを古代文化の制約から解き放つといいながら，逆に現代の特定の文化的偏見や哲学的ドグマを聖書テキストに賦課してしまうという解釈学上の危険についても注意しなくてはならない。現在進行中のコンテクスチュアリゼーション論も，まだこれという決め手になるようなものは生み出されていない。われわれは特定の思想的ドグマにひきまわされることなく，聖書成立における聖霊の働きを正しく位置づけるなら，啓示と文化の連続・非連続の問題と一層真剣に取り組んでゆかなくてはならない。