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THE SACRED BOOK IN RELIGION¹

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THE common basis of our work in this Society is an interest in the Sacred books called 'The Bible'. From different angles and along various lines of research we study the text and context of great literature which Judaism and Christianity regard as authoritative classics of their faith. More than that; since the Sacred Book is a phenomenon of religion in general, and as isolation is a fruitful source of wrong judgment in the historical investigation of ideas and institutions, we decline to detach our Sacred Book from similar books of its class in other faiths of the world. Now, in surveying the history of religion, I seem to detect four negative truths about the Sacred Book. (i) Not every religion possesses a sacred book. (ii) The sacred book does not lie beside the cradle of the faith in question. (iii) No religion lives by its sacred book alone. And (iv) no sacred book can be judged apart from the specific ethos of the faith out of which it rose and for which it exists. Each of these four points would afford elbow-room and more for an address. All I can hope to do is to enquire briefly how far they are applicable to our own sacred book, The Bible.

At the outset I had better say that I quite understand the objection tabled by some Jewish scholars to the use of the term 'Old Testament' in critical discussions within a society like our own, which embraces both Jewish and Christian members. From

¹ Presidential Address given before the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, December 28, 1933.

their point of view, it does imply a religious affirmation or synthesis to which they cannot agree. As a matter of fact, it is curious that in France and even in England, down to the beginning of last century (as readers of Charles Lamb will recollect), the terms 'Bible' and 'Testament' were occasionally employed for what we call 'the Old Testament' and 'the New Testament'. When I use 'Bible' and 'biblical' in their accepted sense, therefore, I simply follow for the sake of convenience the traditional usage of our Society, even although 'Bible' means one thing for a Jew and another for a Christian. The point is, that our common attitude to a Sacred Book involves belief in a collection of ancient literature which was originally intended to represent the sources and the standards of the religion in question; furthermore, that this attitude prompts the desire to apply to its study the ordinary processes of literary and historical criticism.

(i) A Sacred Book or Bible, thus defined, is one thing; religious writings, however popular or primitive, constitute another. A number of ancient religions had no such sacred books at all. Thus, neither the Eddas nor the Pyramid Texts of Egypt were bibles of the people. Neither Greece nor Rome apparently felt any need of a Sacred Book; in the case of Roman religion the nearest analogy, and it is far-off rather than near, would be the Sibylline Oracles, and although the Greek Oracles approximate to the notion of a Sacred Book, as being inspired directions for human life at the cross-roads, still they are a distant parallel. It may be true, as some scholars like Andrew Lang² have maintained, that Hesiod's *Theogony* "was taught to boys in Greece, much as the Church catechism and Bible are taught in England"; certainly the reaction of philosophers like Xenophanes and Heraclitus as early as the sixth century B.C. against the demoralizing effect of veneration for Homer, does indicate that a sort of religious authority attached to the Homeric epics in some circles. But it is only a pretty literary phrase, to speak of Hesiod or Homer as a Bible for the ancient Greeks. No doubt, in some religious movements, such as Orphism and the cult of Isis, hymns and prayers arose. One or two of the mystery-cults

² *Myth, Ritual, and Religion* (chapter x).

show occasional traces of divine words or scriptures in their religious tradition. But this falls short of the full functions assigned to a real Sacred Book.

Nearly sixty years ago, when Max Müller projected "The Sacred Books of the East" series, he found that he had to draw such a distinction. Apart from Judaism and Christianity, he reckoned only six great and original religions which professed to be based in any way upon sacred books; Islam, of course, with Brahminism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, and Taoism. But in two directions this list must be revised. It is only with serious reservations that one can speak of a sacred book in connexion with Brahminism, for example, and the vast baskets of the Buddhist canon are not on the same level as the Koran. Nor do the two Chinese movements rest upon a sacred book, in the strict sense of the term. The Taoist scripture, though composed or inspired by the philosophical Laotze, is as little a definitely religious authority as the classics of Confucianism, which do not profess to be sacred books belonging to the category of the Vedas, for example, although their practical effect upon the civilisation of China did come to resemble that produced by the Sacred Book in Judaism or in Christianity. Even the Vedas make no appeal to the vast mass of Hindoos, who pay little more than a distant homage to their ancestral prestige for the nation, and do not regard them technically as a Bible. On the other hand, it is true that since Max Müller compiled his list, it requires to be enlarged, for Manicheism and the Sikh religion now fall to be included in this class of scriptural faiths.

In Sikhism, that remarkable off-shoot of Hindooism in the Punjaub, which was started by an older contemporary of Martin Luther, there is indeed a liturgical miscellany or Sacred Book, which is venerated and even idolized. Dr. J. N. Farquhar reports that at Conjeveram he once saw an altar where fire-sacrifice was offered to this Granth Sahib or Lord Book. It is the Lord or Guide of devout Sikhs. Even to intone it, without understanding it, is a means of grace. One copy lies in the lovely Golden temple at Amritsar, covered with costly brocade, and before it the faithful lay flowers, sweets, and food; attendant priests fan it, as an act of homage. This is true Bibliolatry. Yet the Granth

Sahib does not regulate the praxis of the Sikhs. It is a huge collection of rhapsodies and regulations, written in a variety of languages, often utterly obscure—a compilation drawn up between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, containing alleged messages of the true Gurus or prophets of the faith. Yet the various sects do not live by their adored book, as Jews, Moslems and Christians do, or profess to do, by theirs. The Sacred Book here is part of the *res sacrae*. A Sikh gains merit by paying a priest to intone it for him, and this counts as a mass for the dead. Certainly the Sacred Book holds the Sikhs together as a nation, but its functions are not those of a bible used by the ordinary worshipper or employed as a guide to life.

The rich, recent finds of Manichean scriptures in Egypt and the far East enable us to see more clearly than ever that Mani planned to compile a sacred book of his own. This third century prophet laid special stress upon the written word. Like Mahommed later, he was convinced that the Jewish and the Christian scriptures were imperfect transcripts of divine revelation. Indeed the parallel with Islam is quite close at this point, for Mani's sacred scriptures like the Koran meant an implicit critique of the very Bible to which they were largely indebted. Mani desired to present his international faith through scriptures, instead of allowing it to trickle along any channels of oral tradition. He appears to have had a canon of his own, a real Bible, for the purpose of conserving and disseminating his supreme religious 'Wisdom', a Bible with psalms, gospels, and apocalypses. Better have this 'Wisdom' written down in authentic form, he thought, than suffer it to be spoiled, as the real message of Jesus had been by never having been committed to writing by Jesus himself, but having been left as a tradition to the inferior minds of his disciples.

However, Manicheism is not a living faith today as even Sikhism may be said to be. Upon the whole, the Sacred Book in its most developed form belongs to only three great religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all derived directly or indirectly from Semitism. Each of these peoples may be fairly described,

as no other can be, in the phrase 'a people of the Book'. The study of Comparative Religion converges on this conclusion.

(ii) That the Sacred Book does not lie close to the cradle of its religion, is obviously true when we take 'sacred book' in the wider sense of any early scripture. When the Oriental belief in divine inspiration was strong, it often preferred oral transmission to any written form. In primitive religion, which is pre-literary, a sacred writing, usually in the shape of an oracle, plays a minor part, and even in the later stages of religion it is oral tradition or transmission which is vital, rather than any literature. A glance at religions such as Hindooism, Brahminism, or Buddhism, is enough to show that the origin of the Sacred Book requires a certain advance in civilisation before its functions can be operative. To take only one instance: when the emancipated adherents of Jainism, in the sixth century B.C., rejected the Vedas for a purer faith, they had to form sacred oracles of their own, but these were handed down orally; indeed the canon of their scriptures was not finally edited until about the middle of the fifth century A.D.

Yet in the case of the three religions of a Book we cannot say without qualification that the Sacred scripture does not lie beside the cradle of the faith. Islam in particular disproves the thesis, for the Koran was compiled within a few years after the Prophet's death. Even Judaism, starting from Ezra's reforms, has the Torah at its centre—no doubt, not the full collection but essentially the Torah as the Sacred nucleus of the nation. The Old Testament does reveal the long gap between Abraham or even Moses and the rise of what was the germ of the Torah. From this point of view it corroborates the principle that the Sacred Book belongs to a fairly mature period in the development of a living religion. Still, the impetus which carried the people from the Mosaic faith of Hebraism into Judaism was at once accompanied by a stress upon the written Word, a stress inherited no doubt from the earlier stages but developing instinctively into a larger and keener devotion to the Sacred Book.

The Christian religion, inheriting scripture from Judaism, also developed almost at once its own literature, the smallest of all Sacred Books. But, while the Old Testament literature took

more than five centuries to grow, the documents afterwards collected into the canon of the New Testament flowered within half a century. Between the first of the apostle Paul's epistles and the end of the first century, the bulk of our New Testament came into being. It is not the only instance of great literature surging up within half a century. There are partial parallels in the Greek prose and poetry that rose between 450 and 400 B.C. from dramatists and historians, also in the supreme poetry of the four Latins, Catullus, Virgil, Lucretius, and Horace, all within half a century, and contemporaries of men like Livy, Cicero, and Sallust; and then we have the sudden emergence of the Elizabethan literature between 1590 and 1640, when a new breath of unity and confidence inspired the people of England, or in the last half of the seventeenth century under Louis Quatorze, when the brilliant literature reflects the energy displayed by France in nearly every department of politics. At such epochs there is commonly an intensity of national life, exciting the imagination; out of this ferment the literature rises. In the case of Christianity, with Christ as its foundation rather than as its founder, there was no nation, indeed, but there was an extraordinary fellowship of faith and common purpose which led to the classics of the new religion blossoming so close upon the initial impulse. The phenomenon is all the more striking if the literary variety of the New Testament is compared with the monotony of the Koran, where the forms of composition are substantially identical, and there is a single authorship.

(iii) By the third century, when the authorities of the Empire realised that the Christian movement was really formidable, they were acute enough to recognize that the possession of a Sacred Book was characteristic of the new faith and cult. The literary attack and a persecution like that of Decius single out Scripture as vital to Christianity. Yet the historian knows that the Christians were not living by their Sacred Book alone during these formative years. The New Testament was held to embody the authentic apostolic witness indeed, but the apostolic succession in the ministry, and the apostolic rule of faith, including the sacraments, were equally organic to the Church. In these pre-canonical years the New Testament was regarded as the

inspired record of apostolic testimony to the deposit of the truth, but both were conveyed and conserved, developed and applied, by the sacred tradition of the Church with its cultus, 'tradition' being practically equivalent to the transmission of a living Spirit which took forms other than those that were merely biblical. Men lived indeed "by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God," but not every such word was written down.

When I say that no religion lives by its Sacred Book alone, I am not referring to the religious literature produced by the religion, generally in the wake of its Sacred Book—to devotional classics like the Bhagavad Gita in Hinduism, the Lotos Scripture or The Awakening of Faith which in Japan especially have moved so many millions of Buddhists, or The Imitation of Christ and The Pilgrim's Progress in western Christendom. It is true that such secondary writings have sometimes usurped a prominence which threatened the primacy of the Sacred Book itself. Thus, one of the causes that led to the comparative relegation of the Bible to an inferior rank within the early ages of western Christendom was not only the habit of stressing the creed (for which the Bible was now important as a source of proof-texts) or of turning to take the Bible as a compendium of doctrine, but the multiplication of saints' lives, biographies of quite inferior character as literature and as religion, but immensely popular. No, what I mean by this statement is that any vital religion which inherits a Sacred Book from a definite age, even from the age of its origin, is obliged to develop an interpretation of it, oral and written, for the purposes and needs of further growth. The people may be the people of a Book, but they are held together by customs and usages as well as by rites, slowly elaborated, and these commonly are related to a Sacred Book which originally made little or no provision for the majority of them.

Hence the rise of what we call 'tradition', which is involved by lapse of time and change of environment for any religious cult that is to survive in the struggle for existence, or rather to survive and thrive, instead of remaining a mere survival, holding on to forms of expression that are now anachronistic. The mate-

rials of tradition, as we meet it in the field of religion, consist of statements about historical data, the interpretation of such data, and also rules for action and life within the community to which the data are communicated, sanctions for conduct, standards for worship, and definite principles of right belief. No doubt the Sacred Book itself reflects this, and further embodies and even applies it. Yet, for all its authority, the Book also requires interpretation, as time goes on. It supplies a norm rather than a form for sacred rites and usages, as a rule. It does discharge a regulative function in the community or Church, but in turn it has to be supplemented to a certain extent by other 'traditions', which are not derived simply from its contents or directly from its verbal statements, and which call out the work of trained priests or scribes. This exigency, which meets all the historical faiths, is the spring of the violent oscillations which have characterized the history of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. At present, within the field of early Christianity there are signs that the problem of 'tradition' is being re-stated and re-considered, just as a truer appreciation of the New Testament literature within the complex of the movement is being gained. In the rebound from a mediaeval attitude which tended to obliterate the paramount significance of the Bible in stressing doctrinal correctness, there was apt to be a one-sided exaggeration of the Bible's function in the first few centuries, which erred by isolating it unduly from the spontaneous growth of 'tradition'.

Up to a certain point, the phenomena of tradition are practically the same in all three faiths. But differences emerge, owing to the specific elements in each. And this brings us to the (iv) fourth point which I suggested, namely that no Sacred Book can be duly judged apart from the specific ethos of the particular religion in question. It is the very problem of tradition in relation to the Sacred Book that sets this point sharply before the mind of the investigator, since the differentia of a faith here become crucial.

Thus, for the devout Moslem the *sunna* or tradition not only explains any difficulties in the text of the Koran but supplements the Koran itself. Which it can do, because *sunna* is regarded as the expression of what Mahommed actually taught, though not

perhaps in writing. The Word of Allah and the *sunna* of His Prophet—these together guide and govern orthodox Islam, just as the oral Law or traditions of Judaism are an extension and authoritative complement of the Torah. In both cases, the community of the nation is held together by the contents of such traditions, embodied in rites and practices especially, in regulations about food and dress and worship, all of them binding upon the believer. To some degree this is also prevalent within Christianity, where from the first apostolic tradition was dominant, and the religion lived by developing fresh forms of thought and life and worship as it continued to meet changes of environment. All of these developments did appeal more or less directly to the original authority implicit in the Sacred Book. They were supposed to be fuller expressions of what had been meant by the Lord. Yet the Christian religion had an ethos of its own which made the relationship between Church and Bible more intricate and urgent than in the case even of Judaism or Islam, since Christianity was not a national religion. In so far as tradition involved the interpretation of the Sacred Book itself, the methods of Christian exegesis were not very different from those of Judaism. But whilst it carried on the idea of a living Word of God, it developed this not only as a term for continuous revelation but for Jesus Christ. Historical Christianity implied more than the possession of a Sacred Book as the palladium, or as a code, or as a record of its origins; it read its scriptures in the light of belief in a living Spirit of God still working in and through history, and the revelation enshrined within the Book was supposed somehow to reverberate still inside the loyal living Church. Thus the formation of the Christian Bible and the functions attributed to it did not precisely correspond to those of the Torah or of the Koran. Both in the Greek and in the Roman branches of catholicism, the vitality and freedom of the Christian spirit was recognized, at any rate in principle, as the Church came to be conceived as the Body of the Lord; honour paid to the Bible as a religious authority of distinctive power was not permitted to turn the Church into a biblical society. It is a minor point, but one worth noting, that the very allegorical interpretation of the Bible helped in this direction.

Fantastic and unreal as it may often appear to our historically trained minds, it not simply saved the Old Testament for Christianity, when some enthusiasts would have scrapped it, but, by its appeal to free imagination, did prevent the faith from becoming too biblical, and witnessed, often in an unsound way, to the sound truth that Christianity is a continuous process within the historical order, neither a meticulous reproduction of the biblical past nor a bible-less liberty for forward-looking souls to make private excursions in search of a faith which had been once delivered to the saints. To hold this sound truth has meant a repeated tension. Yet the tension is inevitable, as the spirit of the faith refuses to isolate the Bible from the Church.

The distinctiveness of the various religions emerges, I repeat, in connexion with the crucial problem of tradition in relation to the Sacred Book. But this opens up into a further point, on which I desire to say a word before closing. Even in form, some sacred books are intended to convey the idea that they are literally the Word of God. This holds true of the Avesta as well as of the Koran; to read these scriptures of the Zoroastrian faith or of Islam, or to listen to them, is to feel instinctively that they claim to be direct utterances of the Deity to mankind, since, even when, as at certain points, the prophet puts questions to his God, the answer comes as the more important feature in the dialogue. There is a partial approach to this in the Laws of Manu, a code based upon the Vedas, which is authoritative for Hindooism; in this manual of religious jurisprudence, Manu speaks for Brahma as his mouthpiece. But it is the Koran which, above almost all sacred books, claims to be the inspired Word of the Deity. No doubt, the Rig-Veda had come to be regarded by Hindoos as the first work of heaven, and claims for a pre-existent entity were also made by rabbis for the Torah, which were not less high. Zoroastrians too believed that their classics had been not simply revealed to the prophet but actually created by God. Still the Koran soars higher. Even in its composition, according to orthodox Islam, it is a miracle. Literally, far more than the Bible, it is God's Word, for not only are its words in Arabic, the language of Allah Himself, but its contents are taken to have been for the most part communicated to the

Prophet in a trance, often by mediation of the angel Gabriel. Thus, in the strict and ancient sense of the term, it is a book of oracles. Indeed the written Koran, which only came into existence after the Prophet's death, when his scribe or secretary Zaid was induced to collect the contents of it, the written Koran is held to be merely a transcript of God's own Word which is safeguarded in heaven. As such it is the final revelation, superseding all previous words of the Lord. Islam thus started with a singular advantage in the matter of a Sacred Book. It had no controversy over any Canon, such as vexed Judaism and Christianity. It managed practically to eliminate textual criticism as a diversion for the devout, being properly conscious that variant readings are incongruous with oracles! The Koran is therefore able to start off bravely by declaring, "There is no doubt in this book." There is nothing like the book of Job, nothing like the arguments of the apostle Paul. Of course, there may be doubts about it, raised by its very claims. Whether the advantage of securing finality at the expense of history and argument is not gained at too heavy a price, is a fair question. But the point is that the Koran secured its hold upon popular Islam by avoiding any problem of a relation between history and religion, even although Islam has had eventually to develop traditions, like Judaism and Christianity, in order to conserve its position within history.

In Judaism and Christianity alike there was and is a definite appeal to history such as Islam does not require. Consequently the very form and content of their Sacred Books differ from the Koran. History enters the pages of the Bible, and with history the inevitable element³ of what is called 'the accidental' or 'the particular' or 'the relative'. Argument and reasoning also have a place, since the revelation is more than a transmission of abstract orders dictated from heaven. The strength of both faiths lay as it lies in this historical conception of religion. But it is obvious that this very strength is accompanied by

³ On the allied problem of the relation of the past to the present, in this connexion, see A. Bill's recent remarks in *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie religieuses* (1933, pp. 331f.).

certain handicaps, from the point of view of a Sacred Book which is supposed to rule a community throughout ages of change. And within Christianity, where the revelation of God is believed to be a personal revelation through the living Lord, the Sacred Book which attests this cannot in the nature of the case be a book exactly like the Old Testament in the synagogue or the Koran in the mosque, nor can it be interpreted precisely as any of these.

It would be too large a task even to outline the problems that swarm round this differentiation of the Sacred Books. I close by calling attention to it, and by suggesting that perhaps the new philosophies of literature which are characteristic of our age may pave the way for a re-consideration of the question of inspiration, especially now that the criticism of the New Testament is passing into larger phases than those contemplated by the literary or historical methods of the last half century. The whole question of the relationship between literature and life, or of the connexion between literary forms and literary forces, makes for a richer appreciation of some ultimate issues relating to the Sacred Book in the sphere of our religion as of any other.