

“The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood.” (Rev.12:15)

The criticism of the inerrancy of Scripture from after the Reformation until present

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The subject is complicated in several ways: First of all, taking up the task one has to be sure when the Reformation really ended. Luther himself says in the Preface of the Smalcald Articles that about that time the reformation of the Church was over.¹ It follows then that the point of departure should be located somewhere in the 1530s. To cover all the critics of almost 500 last years in a meaningful way would need a lifespan close to that of Methuselah. The tricky question, “Has God said?” - has been entertained by too many and in too many ways since the 1530s.² Just to mention the general directions: historical criticism, history of religions school, source criticism, literary criticism, reduction criticism, canon criticism, rhetorical criticism, new literary criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism, feminist criticism, social, political, and ideological criticism. These are only the general ones, each tending to split into smaller branches. As a result, the current directions in critical studies have increased dramatically.³

Characteristic of many, so-called critical biblical studies, is the neglect of the Bible itself. It seems to be a special craft to write about the Bible without even quoting the Bible. For example, Hans W. Frei complains that analyzing modern hermeneutics he has no other way than to let his essay fall “into the almost legendary category of analysis of analyses of the Bible in which not a single text is examined, not a single exegesis undertaken.”⁴ That seems to be the fate of the present essay as well.

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Concordia Triglotta, 459.

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For example Adam Farrar already in 1863 devoted more than 700 hundred pages on the subject. (Farrar, Kindle Edition. Kindle edition is not suggested due to the poor quality of the copied text).

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There are just some of the titles of program units at the 2018 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature: Cognitive linguistics in biblical interpretation; Construction of Christian identities; Contextual biblical interpretation; Contextualizing north African Christianity; Feminist hermeneutics of the bible; Ethnic Chinese biblical colloquium; Gender, sexuality, and the bible; Ideological criticism; Inventing Christianity: apostolic fathers, apologists, and martyrs; Islands, islanders, and scriptures; Journal of feminist studies in religion; Latino/a and Latin american biblical interpretation; Lgbti/queer hermeneutics; Metacriticism of biblical scholarship; Mind, society, and religion: Cognitive science approaches to the biblical world; Minoritized criticism and biblical interpretation; Recovering female interpreters of the bible; Social scientific criticism of the new testament writing; Social-scientific commentaries of the New testament etc.

https://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/congresses_programunits.aspx?meetingid=33/

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The overall picture of the latest biblical research is so messy and contradictory that it is hard to believe so much has been written on the same subject, namely, the Bible. The language and issues discussed by the scholars are often so complicated and far removed from the main subject that their studies remind one of the series of “thought experiments” conducted by physicists Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein on quantum mechanics.⁵ If one looks for a common denominator for the different schools of critical biblical studies then, of course, it is the word “criticism.” That is obvious, but as Norman Geisler has remarked quite a few “writers have pointed to the epistemological roots of the current denial of the inerrancy of Scripture, but few have attempted to identify and elaborate them.”⁶ Therefore the aim of this essay will be a modest attempt to identify the roots of biblical criticism and somewhat explore the process of growth.

An exact formulation also is needed: what is meant by the term “criticism”? J. W. Rogerson, trying to justify the use of historical-criticism, says that “whatever people and churches may claim to do, in practice they all operate with a ‘canon within the canon’ and the Old Testament law can be applied to today’s problems only by being read very selectively and in regard to private, usually sexual morality.”⁷ In fact, we appreciate textual criticism; we do not think that Old Testament theocracy should be practiced in the present day; we don’t stone people for blasphemy and adultery; we have changed the order and interpretation of the only biblical material which the Lord wrote by his own hand, namely, the Ten Commandments; the distinction between the law and gospel might be seen as a critical approach to Bible as well, etc. Somewhat to restrict the discussion looming large it will be enough to say at the moment that by the word “criticism” in this essay is meant any approach to the Bible which does not come from the Bible itself. That leads to the next question: what is the Bible?

Although there were several lists of the biblical canon starting from the 2nd century on, they all differ in some way or another. There was no definite authoritative Church dogma on the texts and translations of Scripture until the Council of Trent. The Council not only included apocrypha in the biblical canon and proclaimed the Vulgate as the authoritative text but also did not pay any attention to the so-called antilegomena. In turn, for the Lutheran church the canon of Scripture is “not an article of faith but the source and norm of all articles of faith.”⁸ The church does not

Frei, vii.

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Such things alienate lay people from science because it is practically impossible to follow their thoughts. In the case of Einstein and Bohr they finally accommodated themselves to a normal human language. To Einstein’s famous quip, “God does not play dice,” Bohr replied, “Einstein, stop telling God what to do.”

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Geisler, Kindle Locations 65-67.

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Rogerson // The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies, 856.

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have authority to determine the canon but the book is recognized as canonical “by virtue of inspiration.”⁹ In short, Scripture testifies of itself. According to Chemnitz only canonical books can establish dogma but the antilegomena are read in churches for edification and all that was said in these books must be understood and explained according to the canonical books.¹⁰ That was the position of the ancient church. In the words of Cyprian, antilegomena are “to be read in the churches but not exalted to a position of authority to confirm the faith from them.”¹¹

Finally, a few words have to be said also about the term “inerrancy.” The word “inerrancy” does not come directly from Scripture itself, but it has been extolled as “the ὁμοούσιον of our time,”¹² not in a way that it would exhaust the subject of the authority of Scripture but as the warning of “which directions not to take.”¹³ There certainly is a similarity between ὁμοούσιος and inerrancy but there is also a notable difference. Ὁμοούσιος is the dogma, necessary for salvation, inerrancy is not. Our 16^s-and 17^s-century dogmaticians “did not even speak of inspiration or the authority of Scripture as a fundamental article of faith.”¹⁴ There have been people who were saved without even knowing that there is such a thing as the Bible, after all. What our dogmaticians said was that Scripture is the source of theology “as the infallible norm of faith and life, but never as the source of Christianity itself.”¹⁵ The one who denies the inerrancy of the Bible but still believes in Christ as his Savior is saved; the one who defends inerrancy but lacks the faith is not.¹⁶ At the same time the inerrancy of Scripture is closely tied to the authority of God and the principle of *sola scriptura*. Doubting the inerrancy of Scripture would lead to the neglect of God’s authority, *sola scriptura*, and eventually to losing Scripture all together leaving one not only in the darkness of the fallen human mind but also under the judgment of

Preus, 1970, 304.

9

Ibid.

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Chemnitz, 189.

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As quoted by Chemnitz, Ibid, 180.

12

Stephenson, 4.

13

Ibid.

14

Preus, 1955, 210.

15

Ibid.

16

Becker, 88.

Law. Human wisdom elevated above the Word becomes nothing more than foolishness.¹⁷

Although the term “inerrancy” is not taken directly from the Bible it is biblical; it follows directly from the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture as the logical consequence. The whole doctrine of verbal inspiration in turn is set forth, although “in embryonic form,”¹⁸ in the Nicene Creed. The Creed confesses that the Holy Spirit “spoke by the Prophets.”¹⁹ That is almost a direct quote from Luke 1:70. It is also true that there is no definite article on Scripture in the Lutheran Confessions. Nevertheless the doctrine of inerrancy of Scripture is clearly set forth, for example, in the Large Catechism where Luther says that we baptize infants “solely upon the command of God.” The word “solely” here is important. “Why so?” – Luther asks. “Because we know that God does not lie... all men may err and deceive, but the Word of God cannot err.”²⁰ Although the orthodox Lutheran fathers of the 16s and 17s century did not use the word “inerrancy” but rather veracity, infallibility, lack of error and mistakes whatsoever, there is no difference in the meaning of the terms: Scripture is true and reliable in all aspects because it is the inspired Word of God.²¹

Objections have been raised that this is just a tautology or circular reasoning. That is not the case with Luther and orthodox Lutherans! The Lutheran fathers insisted that it is a matter of faith and there is no need to demonstrate it by any kind of extra-biblical apologetics. “It is always assumed that once the divine origin of Scripture is established exegetically, the truthfulness and reliability of Scripture follow.”²² In fact, the Lutheran fathers speaking on the infallibility of Scripture did not depend on

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“The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have?” (Jer. 8: 9)

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Becker, 12.

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Concordia Triglotta, 31.

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Concordia Triglotta, 747. A Finish theologian Mikka Ruokanen has tried to demonstrate that Luther has never said that Scripture are inspired. That strange statement has been thoroughly discussed and refuted by Tom Hardt (Hardt, 1993).

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Preus, 1970, 394, note 241.

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Preus, 1970, 342-343. It has induced Hermann Sasse to object that, put in this way inerrancy of Scripture seems to be based on Aristotelian logic of causality. Tom Hardt presents a good analysis on Sasses dislike for Aristotelian philosophy, his preference to Platonic thought, and even modern science. He concludes: “To Sasse, as to so many others of his time and his cultural climate, trust in reason as leading us to the source of our existence, taken in the sense of a *cognito legalis*, a knowledge of the Law, seemed impossible because of its historical connection with paganism and because natural science had made impossible the basis of metaphysical arguments.” (Hardt, 1998, 165)

philosophical definitions of truth, neither on a biblical study of the idea of truth. They simply used Aristotelian language or that of Aquinas as a way to say that inerrancy is agreement of thoughts or words to the actual state of affairs.²³ Tom Hardt, answering Sasse's objections that, put in this way, inerrancy of Scripture seems to be based on Aristotelian logic of causality, rightly admits, "There is and always will be a kind of commonsense philosophy that is already present in the biblical material and that will be the necessary condition for entering its world as well as any world of any kind. A full trust in causality, for example, belongs to this commonsense philosophy and epistemology."²⁴ What Aristotle says with regard to causality is not his invention but the discovery of reality; likewise Plato's thoughts on the immortality of soul. "Scripture regularly presupposes some form of correspondence theory of truth and, indeed, this is both the commonsense view and the classic position embraced by virtually all philosophers until the nineteenth century."²⁵ For the Lutheran fathers, "Scripture's truthfulness is accepted a priori, as a matter of faith, before any investigation or a posteriori verification, because God who witnesses in Scripture is wholly honest and will never deviate from the truth."²⁶ Siegbert Becker concludes that it is "take-it-or-leave-it proposition."²⁷ That is the reason why the Lutheran position has to be clearly distinguished from those forms of the so-called inductive fundamentalism, which first seek to demonstrate that Scripture is accurate, credible, and trustworthy and then, building on that, recognized as inerrant.²⁸ There is also no way to find another criterion to justify the truthfulness of Scripture except that Scripture is the Word of God. Instead of trying to defend the Bible one should better follow Spuergon's counsel: Let the lion out of

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Preus, 1970, 343.

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Hardt, 1998, 159.

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Moreland & Craig, 132.

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Preus, 1970,345.

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Becker, 81. Unfortunately he adds that "those who are guided by the Spirit of God will accept it". That seems to be close to that of Calvin's and Beza's position developed at the time of Servetus trial. The Calvinists insisted that the inner light is correct and that is given or guided by the Holy Spirit. But how does one tell "infatuation" from genuine illumination? Here the only criteria offered appear to be no other than just a private opinion: "Calvin thinks Calvin is illumined." (Popkin,14) It is easy to see the circularity of argument: "The criterion of religious knowledge is inner persuasion, the guarantee of the authenticity of inner persuasion is that it is caused by God, and this we are assured of by our inner persuasion." (Popkin, 14) The Roman church had to face the same epistemological problem. At the end of the day they came to acknowledge that according to the Church's position only pope is infallible. "But who can tell who is the pope? The member of the Church has only his fallible lights to judge by. So only the pope can be sure who is the pope; the rest of the members have no way of being sure and hence no way of finding any religious truths." (Popkin, 2003, 13-14)

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the cage. He will take care for himself. Contemporary theologians and people in general have forgotten the maxim that truth is not to be proven; it authenticates itself and possesses extreme force of persuasion.²⁹

In short, either we do have the definite and completely reliable source of theology, or we are forced into the vicious circles of human reasoning and endless regression of thought, atheism, or history of religions school at the best.³⁰ “The idea that God errs in any way, in any place, or in any endeavor is repugnant to the mind as well as the soul. Here, biblical criticism reaches the nadir of biblical vandalism.”³¹ All that was said above about the meaning and purpose of the term “inerrancy” could be collected in one basic principle: “certainty,” and that certainty is bestowed by the Scriptures themselves, and only by the Scriptures as “God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word.”³²

The roots of biblical criticism

It seemed that historical criticism has won complete victory in the middle of the last century, at least in academic circles, but it is strongly questioned nowadays, at least among Anglo-Americans. The reason for doubting the method is not the recovery of old theological interpretation of Scripture but the new critical studies working with the tools of the same historical-critical method, such as liberation theology, feminist criticism, structuralism, and post-structuralism. The critical method in general has

For more about various kinds of fundamentalism see Harriet A. Haris. Fundamentalism(s) // *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, 810-840.

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It might seem strange to us that the early Lutheran dogmaticians constructed the whole doctrine of the natural knowledge of God on the basis of revelation given in Scripture. The reason for that was that they did not see any need to bother themselves with empirical data “when the Biblical proof is so easy and available.” (Preus, 1972,21) That was just one instance of *sola scriptura* principle at work. The same attitude should be appropriated towards all areas of human life. Having absolute truth available in Scripture one has no need to bother for a contingent truth of science, history etc. The great problem is that people have so long played with the sweet word “fact”, that they have forgotten the meaning of the word “truth”. Truth is not something we can pick up by our choice, possess or control or defend. It rather picks up and controls us being ultimately demanding, at the same time it protects us, gives meaning, and the peace of heart. Alexander Solzhenitsyn reminded us of that at the end of his Noble prize lecture quoting a Russian proverb: “ONE WORD OF TRUTH SHALL OUTWEIGH THE WHOLE WORLD.” He knew that only truth can overcome communist nuclear weapons, tanks, and cannons and it did. It wasn’t coincidence that the Empire of evil broke down exactly on the Christmas day when the coming of the Word of Truth into human flesh was celebrated. https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html

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As formulated by Wrede and Ebeling: “The name ‘biblical theology’ means originally not a theology which is contained in the Bible, but a theology which has biblical character, which is created from the Bible.” (Quotation from *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, 720.)

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Sproul // *The Inerrant Word*, 9.

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Concordia Triglotta, 495.

remained the same, although with considerable modifications. It has encouraged people outside the discipline to wonder: is not the very method discredited by the different results achieved by using one and the same method? Rogerson replies that if this argument had any validity “it would have to apply to all academic disciplines from Classics to the Natural Sciences!”³³ Rogerson thinks that by saying that he has exhausted the question. What if he has not? What if natural sciences face the same problems as biblical criticism just because they come from the same philosophical background? Modern science is based on falsification, criticism, and doubt, as is the historical-critical method in biblical studies. The similarity of methods seems to allow the adherents of the historical-critical method to extol themselves as scientists. That may not be the case, and it isn’t, but already at this point it becomes apparent that Rogerson’s argument looks deadly circular; just one of the contemporary ideologies. It leaves one to wonder: why is biblical criticism something to be appreciated by all but the theory of evolution, the idea of progress, and pluralism are the “sacred cows,” “party line” etc., which no one is encouraged to criticize?³⁴ Richard M. Weaver, in his critique of Modernism, traces the roots of modern science with its multiple disciplines, internal contradictions, obsession with facts, details, and neglect of universal ideas to nominalism.³⁵ Demonstrating his thesis that “ideas have consequences,” Weaver says that “man created in the divine image, the protagonist of a great drama in which his soul was at stake, was replaced by man the wealth-seeking and -consuming animal.”³⁶ After the authority in moral questions was delivered to science, “there is ground for declaring that modern man has become moral idiot.”³⁷ The problem is not in science and scientific method as such but its application. Science, for example, never pronounces value judgments. Remaining within the limits of its method science can only tell what *is* but never what *should be*. The Bible in turn is replete with value judgments and moral imperatives. For that reason alone the term “biblical science” is simply an oxymoron. Besides, Geisler observes that “the rise of an errant view of Scripture did not result from a discovery of factual evidence that made belief in an inerrant Scripture untenable.”³⁸ Or to put

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Rogerson// The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies, 843.

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“Even when the great philosopher of science Karl Popper suggested that the standard version of evolution even falls short of being a scientific theory, being instead an untestable tautology, he was subjected to public condemnations and much personal abuse.”

(<http://www.aei.org/publication/fact-fable-and-darwin/>)

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Weaver, 3-4.

36

Ibid, 6.

37

Ibid, 1.

38

Geisler, 98-99 Kindle Locations.

in the words of Colin Brown: “It was not science which in the end posed the biggest challenge to the Christian world view. It was the philosophical interpretation of the world which had their roots in the ancient pagan philosophy rediscovered at Renaissance.”³⁹

There are others who have said that the inerrancy of the Scripture was first questioned in the 17th century by Socinianism, and that until that time everybody agreed that the Scriptures are inspired and therefore inerrant. “As the result there was greater agreement, for example, between Luther and Zwingli than there is today between many churches and synods that bear the name Lutheran.”⁴⁰ It might be so in some way, but the reason for this generalization is obviously more apologetic than it is historically true. It is an attempt to present a more or less unified front of Lutherans, Catholics (including East and West), Reformed groups, and even Zwingli against the heretical spirits of the modern times. Others have pointed to Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) as the forerunner of biblical criticism.⁴¹ For many, Richard Simon (1638-1712) from France is the “Father of Biblical Criticism” who “is said to have been the first to introduce the word critique into the discussion of the Bible (1678).”⁴² It is not uncommon to mark the modern departure from biblical authority and inerrancy from the early 19th century.⁴³ However, according to Geisler, it was Spinoza’s anti-supernatural rationalism that laid the groundwork of modern biblical criticism in the late 1670s.⁴⁴ Frei agrees, naming also Hugo Grotius and Richard Simon, but he says that “there is no doubt that as concerted practice, building into a

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Brown, 156.

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Becker,10.

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http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Higher_criticism

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Geisler, 100 Kindle Locations.

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In 1804 Johann Eichhorn issued a critical introduction to the New Testament. In academic cycles the criticism of Biblical accounts of the history of Israel, the life of Jesus and origins of Christianity reached its high point in 1835, with the publications of *Biblical Theology* by W. Vatke and *Life of Jesus* by D. F. Strauss. They were followed by F. C. Baur’s lectures on the New Testament about a decade later. Baur transposed the true principle of *sola scriptura* to the principle of criticism or autonomy. He even inverted the traditional scripture principle and suggested that “an absolute authority of Scripture” stands “in the clearest contradiction with the protestant principle, the free right of scriptural research.” That is to say, that an appeal to Scripture as authoritative in itself is decidedly unevangelical. Julius Wellhausen (1876) popularized the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch. Before this (ca. 1866) K. H. Graf laid down the basis of the JEPD theory. And even before these men, other scholars had in effect denied the inerrancy of Scripture. H. B. Witter (1711) believed in two accounts of creation, and Jean Astruc used divine names to identify some dozen different writers in Genesis (1753).

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Geisler, 100-106 Kindle Locations.

continuing tradition and literature, it started in the second half of the eighteenth century, chiefly among German scholars."⁴⁵ Most commonly it has been said that the critical approach toward Scripture started at the Enlightenment.⁴⁶ That is a widespread but superficial cliché. The Enlightenment was criticized by many,⁴⁷ but as all great epochs in human history it has certain roots and is a result of a longer development. That is well known as it is well known that the guiding lights of the Enlightenment were reason, nature, and progress. What has been much less noticed is the popularity of Freemasonry among the enlightened thinkers.⁴⁸ Disgusting as it is, the Enlightenment with all its guilt and fault is rather a sad consequence, not the cause. What actually happened in Enlightenment was a dramatic change in hermeneutics. Frei agrees that it started with Spinoza.⁴⁹ There was criticism of the Bible already before Spinoza but he "took things to an unprecedented extreme and, in the eyes of his contemporaries, crossed the line."⁵⁰ Actually he was not alone in doing so but he was most advanced, persistent, and widely studied. A disturbed critic of Spinoza's book (first published anonymously) *Theological-Political Treatise* went even so far as to call it "'a book forged in hell' written by the devil himself."⁵¹ What changed actually with Spinoza and later in the Enlightenment was the approach to the Bible, its hermeneutics. If previously the Bible was the Word of God which acted and shaped the world, like in Augustine's *City of God*, and everything what happened in the world was to be explained from Scripture, then starting with Spinoza Scripture

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Frei, 17.

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For example James Woelz says that: "The Bible was viewed as the Word of God in words of men by Christians for many centuries-until the so-called Enlightenment of the 18th century." (Woelz, 16.)

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Including such left minded materialists of the Frankfurt School as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Regardless what one thinks of their criticism they are right pointing to the nominalistic character of Enlightenment. "But the Enlightenment discerned the old powers in the Platonic and Aristotelian heritage of metaphysics and suppressed the universal categories' claims to truth as superstition. In the authority of universal concepts the Enlightenment detected a fear of the demons through whose effigies human beings had tried to influence nature in magic rituals." (Horkheimer and Adorno 3.)

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"Whereas the Christian sacraments were repudiated as the product of priestcraft, the arcane mysteries of Freemasonry were hailed as the symbolic path to virtue and the means of achieving universal brotherhood." (Brown, 287) It is also noteworthy that optimism of Enlightenment was tainted with dark pessimism, like other epochs were humanity was divinized.

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Frei, 42.

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Nadler, 110. Kindle location.

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Nadler, 42. Kindle location.

was explained by what happened in the world. History, reason, and science became the ultimate judges. This is true for hermeneutics but for biblical criticism as such we have to go further back. Eta Linneman, like Colin Brown, points to Humanism. Although Humanism contributed to philology and learning and its influence has also a positive character,⁵² it switched the emphasis from the divine to human. "God's Word is no longer the standard in humanism but is, rather judged by standard of humanistic culture. . . . God's Word [became] just a product of the activity of this human spirit. . . .When the flesh assumes absolute sovereignty . . . it opposes every living manifestation of the Spirit."⁵³ Understood in the way of humanism life loses real basis and is grounded "in nothing more than arrangements and agreements."⁵⁴ That was the humanistic agenda which developed further in the Enlightenment, German idealism, and the age of technology with its strong emphases on empiricism.

That Humanism leads to pessimism, which manifests also in everyday life as the distrust and lack of confidence in the divine purpose of human life, was observed already by early Lutheran reformers.⁵⁵ They worked hard to fight skepticism which had become popular in all areas of life. There is enough historical evidence to look for the causes of modern biblical criticism back into ancient pagan skepticism as it manifested itself in the late medieval period and the Renaissance movement. But before we try to scrutinize that period a few words have to be said about Luther since Luther also has been labeled a nominalist, and the one who, although unwillingly, in many ways contributed to what eventually become historical-criticism.⁵⁶

The argument for Luther's nominalism has been built on Heiko Oberman's research and refuted by Lewis Spitz and his pupils. To put it shortly, Luther certainly "owed little or nothing to the *Via Gregorii*."⁵⁷ Of course, Luther was trained in *via moderna* but the striking feature of Luther's theology is that he was "so different from

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For more see: *The Harvest of Humanism in Central Europe: Essays in Honor of Lewis Spitz*, edited by Manfred P. Fleischer. St. Louis: CPH, 1992.

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Linneman, 26.

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Ibid, 27.

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For Lutheran answer to skepticism, see: Robert L. Rosin. *Reformers, the Preacher, and Skepticism Response to Skepticism: Luther, Brenz and Melancton, And Ecclesiastes*. Mainz: Verlag Philip Von Zabern, 1997.

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Morrow, 2017, 5-6.

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Spitz//Light for our World, 146.

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them.”⁵⁸ This has been observed also by Bengt Haeglund⁵⁹ and others. It is obviously a wrong idea that Luther was a nominalist or depended on any certain philosophy.⁶⁰ We obviously need a different starting point for biblical criticism than Luther!

It has been said also that with his appeal to Scripture and conscience Luther promoted an intellectual crisis, which in spite of his “bombastic denunciations of Erasmus’ skepticism . . . became a stock claim of the Counter-Reformers to assert that the Reformers were just sceptics in disguise.”⁶¹ Historians have also accused Luther of opening Pandora’s box of subjectivism “that was to have the most far-reaching consequences, not just in theology but throughout the entire intellectual realm of the West.”⁶² Luther’s and his closest coworkers’ reaction to skepticism was thoroughly analyzed by Robert Rosin in his important but little noticed PhD dissertation at Stanford University in 1985, later published in Germany.⁶³ Luther, Brenz, and Melanchthon used Ecclesiastes to combat spiritual doubt mainly for pastoral reasons since they felt that skepticism is an evil idea directed to undermine “confidence in God’s continued gracious preservation of his creation. All other skeptical challenges paled by comparison.”⁶⁴ Foreshadowing the perils of modern times, Luther, Brenz, and Melanchthon realized their reformer’s task in proclamation of “trust and confidence in the larger, unseen divine purpose and pattern in daily life, even as the struggle with skepticism continued to the end of time.”⁶⁵ As we turn to skepticism first, a general description of its antique forms will be given, then a

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ibid.

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“If the relation between occamism and Luther is considered only on the ground of the theory of knowledge, then there seems to be only a minimal difference between them, a nuance. But when the theological meaning and the practical consequences of this difference are examined, it seems like a profound and pregnant transformation of all theological methodology and of Christian dogmatic theology.” (Haeglund, 451-452)

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“In both Luther and Calvin, familiarity with ancient philosophy is perhaps most evident in those places which are concerned with the vindication of basic religious beliefs in the face of skepticism. Reformation theology could draw on ancient philosophy and acknowledge its insights without embracing it in toto or endorsing anyone particular philosophy.” (Brown, 155.)

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Popkin, 2003, 10.

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Popkin, 2003, 5.

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Robert L. Rosin. *Reformers, the Preacher, and Skepticism Response to Skepticism: Luther, Brenz and Melanchton, And Ecclesiastes*. Mainz: Verlag Philip Von Zaber, 1997. Quotations in this essay are from Rosin’s PhD dissertation at Stanford University, 1985.

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Rosin, 486.

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look at theology contributing to skepticism will be taken, and finally the impact of humanist philosophy and skepticism in the common life of the ordinary people will be discussed briefly.

Ancient skepticism

Skepticism had its origins in ancient Greek thought. In the Hellenistic Period (2nd-3rd century BC), skeptics developed a set of arguments to establish either (1) that no knowledge was possible or (2) that there was insufficient and inadequate evidence to determine if any knowledge was possible, and hence that one ought to suspend judgment on all questions concerning knowledge. The first of these views is called Academic skepticism (founded by Arcesilaus [315-240 BC] and propagated by Carneades in the second century BC). According to this form of skepticism, the best information can be only probable and is to be judged according to probabilities. As a result, the Academic skeptics said that nothing is certain. Hence, Academic skeptics developed a type of verification theory and a type of probabilism that is somewhat similar to the theory of scientific “knowledge” of present-day pragmatists and positivists.⁶⁶

The second school is Pyrrhonian skepticism, named after its founder Pyrrho of Elis (360-270 BC). The last great pyrrhonian was Sextus Empiricus, who lived during the last half of the 2nd and the first decades of the 3rd century AD.⁶⁷ The Pyrrhonians rejected any dogmatism and proposed to suspend judgment on all questions about which there seemed to be conflicting evidence, including the question whether or not something could be known. The Pyrrhonian skeptics tried to avoid committing themselves on any and all questions, even as to whether their arguments were sound. It was this kind of skepticism which posed a challenge in the age of the Renaissance, “leaving no ground for making assertions.”⁶⁸

Skepticism in the age of Renaissance

The Pyrrhonian view was little known in the West until its rediscovery in the late 15th century.⁶⁹ As the two most prominent cases of skepticism in the Medieval Period, the Roman Emperor Frederick II (1194-1250) and theologian Peter Abelard (1079-1142) could be mentioned. There was also some interest in skepticism among the Jewish and Muslim scholars during the Middle Ages but that was the age of Renaissance

Ibid, 490.

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Popkin, 2003, xvii-xx.

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On Sextus Empiricus see Morison, Benjamin, "Sextus Empiricus", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/sextus-empiricus/>>.

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Rosin, 10 -11.

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Popkin, 2003, XIX.

which experienced the rebirth of ancient pagan skepticism, although some indications of the growing skeptical thought have been detected already in nominalism and late medieval mysticism.

Epistemological questions have always bothered theologians, and too often they have looked for support in pagan wisdom. In the main school of medieval scholasticism, *via antiqua*, moderate realism with its main representative Aquinas, tried to harmonize reason and revelation. Although reason was not considered ultimately authoritative apart from revelation, it was “raised to considerable heights and was thought to cooperate with and to confirm that which was revealed.”⁷⁰ The main authority for Aquinas and many others was Augustine and Aristotle.

The synthesis and search for harmony of *via antiqua* was challenged by the nominalists of high scholasticism. Perhaps the term “nominalism” here is misleading. Frederick C. Copleston suggests rather “terminism”⁷¹ as a more adequate description of Ockham⁷² and his followers since “they were more concerned with the logical status and function of terms.”⁷³ Their ideas were highly sophisticated and “the new movement was complex in character and influence.”⁷⁴ There are of course different views regarding nominalism but recent studies have demonstrated that, for example, Ockham was a much more conservative philosopher and theologian than it was previously thought; “a Franciscan Aristotelian.”⁷⁵ Gabriel Biel in turn “emerged as a teacher who links medieval theology with post-Reformation Catholicism.”⁷⁶ For our purposes it would be enough to state that nominalists taught that reality lies in particulars and they suspected any idealism. For Ockham the realist view that universals are real things was “the worst error of philosophy.”⁷⁷

70

Rosin, 81.

71

Coplestone, 230-231.

72

Ockham did not criticize Aquinas any more than did others. It is fair enough, however, to say that Ockham was a major force of change at the end of the Middle Ages. He was a courageous man with an uncommonly sharp mind. His philosophy was radical in his day and continues to provide insight into current philosophical debates. <https://www.iep.utm.edu/ockham/>

73

Brown, 137.

74

Coplestone, 233.

75

Brown, 138.

76

Ibid.

77

The basic tenet of nominalist thought was “unity, freedom, and omnipotence of God.”⁷⁸ Exploring the consequences of accepting divine omnipotence and a divine source for all knowledge nominalists examined puzzles about whether God could deceive mankind, regardless of the evidence, and could make all human reasoning open to question. Being heavily involved in the questions of the divine will, nominalists concentrated on the doctrine of predestination which sometimes came close to pagan fatalism.⁷⁹ Affirming the two aspects of God’s power, nominalists spoke about the absolute power of God and that power which actually manifests in God’s works (*potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinate*), a theme which was taken over from Aquinas. In William of Ockham and his followers the combination of predestination with voluntarism resulted in the doctrine which appears “simultaneously deterministic and Pelagian.”⁸⁰ That led to a pronounced skepticism as “the reason why God chose to do some things and not others as well as how he arrived at those decisions and ultimately carried them out was, in the nominalist view, beyond man’s ability to fathom.”⁸¹ For that reason the knowledge of God’s actions depended only on revelation and man was left to struggle with a constant tension and non-rational resolution or to look for some other alternative. In short, Ockham and his followers were strict fideists. Although the great dilemma of later medieval theology-- how to deal with the gulf between faith and knowledge -- was resolved, the former idea of the nature-supernature continuum was destroyed. When pressed to its end, nominalism left man in doubt about his earthly life and salvation as well. The threats of skepticism were real, since there was no imaginable way to describe the relationship between God as subject and man as object of His working.⁸² One way to address the hard questions concerning reason and revelation and intersection between natural and supernatural was mysticism, with the old idea of the imitating Christ becoming extremely popular. Although Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* was widely read as well as the pantheistic writings of Meister Eckhart, the real challenge to epistemology lay in the influential work of cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464).⁸³

Quoted in Brown, 137.

78

Pelikan, 25.

79

Ibid, 32

80

Ibid, 35.

81

Rosin, 82.

82

Ibid, 85-86.

83

Nicholas of Cusa or Cusanus is variously appreciated in the 21st century, as a Christian disciple of the burgeoning Italian humanism of the 15th century, one of the great mystical theologians and reforming bishops of the late Middle Ages, and a dialogical religious thinker whose philosophical

Cusanus was highly critical of any speculative theology. His agenda was to “leave everything behind and even transcend one’s intellect,” going “beyond all sense, reason, and intellect to mystical vision.”⁸⁴ All assertions and value judgments had to be suspended which is strikingly characteristic to ancient pagan skepticism. The way of salvation for Cusanus was deification.⁸⁵ “In the end Cusanus broke the bond between logic and metaphysics and dissolved both God and the world as separate and distinct concepts.”⁸⁶ As to the knowledge of God, Cusanus proposed *via negativa*. So theology became highly circular. Besides, Cusanus demanded to consider God in opposites and everyone was obliged to consider alternatives. Consequently “there could be no firm presentation of knowledge; there is only conjecture.”⁸⁷ That was a real threat of skepticism. Looking for truth one had to eliminate the element of faith and reduce metaphysics to mathematics, which Cusanus considered to be the most precise language. That led not only to skepticism about theology but one could also apply *via negativa* to itself. As a result, Cusanus launched a successful attack on scholasticism but at the same time he created a potential crisis “unavoidably also suggesting the alternative of skepticism.”⁸⁸

A revival of interest in ancient skepticism in popular culture started among Florentine humanists. Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) was the first to suggest that Greek skeptical writings should be published in Latin as a part of the defense of true religion. Savonarola asked two of his monks to prepare a Latin translation of Sextus’ works but the project was not completed since Savonarola’s convent was destroyed and he was executed. Gianfrancesco Pico, one of Savonarola’s disciples and the nephew of the great Pico della Mirandola, published the first work using skepticism as a way of challenging all of philosophy. Gianfrancesco Pico’s *Examen Vanitatis* (1520) is usually considered the first work to present Sextus in Latin for the European audience⁸⁹ which was followed by other translations, including English and

and political ideas peacefully contemplate the unity of old wisdom and new, Christian and Muslim religious aspirations, and even the differences between cultures and nations. (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/nicholas/>)

84

Pelikan, 64.

85

Ibid, 66.

86

Rosin, 92.

87

Ibid, 93.

88

Ibid, 94.

89

Rosin points to the two Latin translations of Sextus Empiricus from thirteens or fourteens century (Rosin, 18).

French.⁹⁰ The intentions of Renaissance philosophers were not anti-religious but rather attempts “to explore the broadest possible limits of belief and to achieve harmony with other systems of thought, seeking the truth which they hoped they would find common to philosophy and Christian religion.”⁹¹ For example, Pico della Mirandola in his “Oration” was trying “to harmonize the views of Platonists, Aristotelians, Zoroaster and the Chaldeans, the Old Testament Hebrews, Pythagoreans, New Testament Christianity, and others, all combining to offer a positive anthropology, trumpeting man’s intellectual achievements and possibilities still to come.”⁹² It was not a direct expression of skepticism but it made skepticism to be a reasonable possibility. Another example is an Italian scholar and Catholic priest Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), the head of Platonist Academy in Florence who taught that neo-platonism was as authoritative as Christian revelation. Ficino was not a skeptic in a technical sense of the word but by denying the uniqueness of Christian revelation he provided a place for serious doubt.⁹³ A couple of decades later, Erasmus introduced other skeptical themes as a way of dealing with Luther’s challenges. Also, thinkers like Michel Montaigne, Marin Mersenne, and Pierre Gassendi turned to Sextus for materials to use in dealing with the issues of their age. By the end of the 17th century, the great sceptic Pierre Bayle could look back and see the reintroduction of the arguments of Sextus as the beginning of modern philosophy. Voltaire later said that Bayle had provided the arsenal of the Enlightenment. Helmut Thielicke says that the Enlightenment along with the preparatory and succeeding systems can be summarized in a short phrase: “centuries of doubt.”⁹⁴ Since the Enlightenment, it has increasingly become a religious doubt.⁹⁵

90

In 1562 Henri Estienne (Stephanus) published a Latin translation of the *Pyrrhonianum Hypotyposes* in Paris, and in 1569 Gentian Hervet published a Latin translation of *Adversus mathematicos* in Antwerp. The Greek texts were first printed at Cologne, Paris, and Geneva in 1621. Some texts of Sextus appeared in English in 1592 in a work attributed to Sir Walter Raleigh titled "The Skepticke." A full translation of Book One of Sextus appeared in 1659 in Thomas Stanley's *History of Philosophy*; instead of explaining skepticism he just presented the whole book to the readers. A French translation was started by Pierre Gassendi's disciple Samuel Sorbière but was never finished or published. The first complete French translation, by Claude Huart, did not appear until 1725. ([Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#). Retrieved March 08, 2018 from [Encyclopedia.com](#))

91

Rosin, 22.

92

Ibid, 23.

93

The same could be said about Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) who in a degree challenged the character and even the possibility of definite standards.

94

Thielicke, 34.

95

Regardless of what may be called achievements of the Renaissance's exaltation of human dignity and knowledge, the age of the Renaissance was a traumatic period, marked by famine, pestilence, war and revolt. The shortage of food, the Black Death, the Hundred Years' War, peasant revolts, robbery; these were the sad realities of human life, coupled with the crisis of the Church and the fragmentation of intellectual thought.⁹⁶ The overall situation contributed greatly to the growing pessimism and skepticism in literature, arts, and common life. To put in the words of Robert Rosin: "The end result is an informally, naturally developed skepticism as man, with his best hopes and efforts dashed, decides finally that he cannot achieve his goals of using the world. Thus he withdraws from the struggle and lives out his life, merely following general convention for the sake of coping with various problems and arriving at the decisions demanded in daily life. There is no real commitment there; rather one lives provisionally as if life were only provisional."⁹⁷ This even led to a notion that the only escape from the misery of life was death. The *Totentanz* grew in popularity in art and *Ars moriendi* became a classic in the 15th-century literature.⁹⁸ The attraction to death took pathological forms such as enjoyment of public executions conducted in the most brutal ways. The public places for execution became also popular places for picnics. Witchcraft was widespread regardless of severe persecutions as people looked for alternative means of safety, a last resort for those who were looking for ways to gain stability in their lives, a way to cope with the misery of life.⁹⁹ The age was marked also by different esoteric ideas. The two noticeable cases were hermetic tradition¹⁰⁰ and Cabala, the best-known expositors of which were Pico della Mirandola, Johannes Reuchlin, Agrippa of Nettesheim, and Theophrastus Paracelsus. Augustinian canon Egidio de Viterbo, who exercised great influence on Johannes von Staupitz, arranged translations of Cabala into Latin.¹⁰¹ Besides both theological methods of the Middle Ages' *via antiqua* and especially *via moderna*, Renaissance's humanism greatly contributed to the rising skepticism. The skeptical spirit of the Renaissance also greatly affected the moral life

"Skepticism, especially since the Enlightenment, has come to mean disbelief—primarily religious disbelief—and the skeptic has often been likened to the village atheist." (Skepticism, History of." [Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#). Retrieved March 08, 2018 from Encyclopedia.com:)

96

For a general introduction of the age of Renaissance see Spitz, Lewis W. *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*. Revised Edition, Volume I, The Renaissance. St. Louis: CPH, 1987.

97

Rosin, 38.

98

Ibid, 40.

99

Ibid, 50-51.

100

Derived from the name of a mythical person Hermes Trismegistus.

101

Rosin, 56.

of the highest clergy especially in Rome: "Clerical morality in Italy under Renaissance influence become byword, and the papal curia a scandal to Christendom."¹⁰² The spirit of skepticism was part and parcel of the Roman church at the turn of 16th century. Friedrich Nietzsche observes that the Renaissance humanism was about to sweep Christianity away, but something happened: "A German monk, Luther, came to Rome. . . . Instead of grasping, with profound thanksgiving, the miracle that had taken place: the conquest of Christianity at its capital . . . Luther saw only the depravity of the papacy at the very moment when the opposite was becoming apparent . . . there was the triumph of life! Instead there was a great yea to all lofty, beautiful and daring things! . . . And Luther restored the church: he attacked . . . the Renaissance."¹⁰³ Then, after blaming Germans for almost all the evils of the world, Nietzsche concludes, "They also have on their conscience the uncleanest variety of Christianity that exists, and the most incurable and indestructible—Protestantism. . . . If mankind never manages to get rid of Christianity the Germans will be to blame. . . ."¹⁰⁴ That is how Nietzsche concludes his "Antichrist." There is another Antichrist at which we need to look more closely.

The council of Trent and its aftermath

After the success of the Reformation, the greatest concern for the Roman church was the unity of the church. In their mind, the Reformation threatened the church's unity regardless of the fact that great doctrinal diversity already existed in the Western Church. Recognizing the question of authority as the greatest challenge to the Western Church, Rome with its strong reaction to the Reformation created what Jaroslav Pelikan calls the paradox of "Catholic particularity."¹⁰⁵ As to the unity of the Church in its catholic sense the Council of Trent was a failure, but it certainly was not a German failure since there were only two German bishops at the opening of the council. The majority were Italian, so highly praised by Nietzsche. There is no doubt that the general intentions of the fathers of the council were good: to safeguard the unity of the Catholic Church, at least in its Western part. They were strongly convinced that unity is the highest good to which all other considerations should be subjected. It has become more and more obvious to Roman theologians since the early days of the Lutheran Reformation that their goal cannot be achieved without making inroads into *sola scriptura*, the mighty fortress of the Lutheran faith. After the first three preliminary sessions, the council resorted to that task, formulating its first doctrinal decision on Holy Scripture at session IV.

102

Deanesly, 257.

103

Nietzsche, 61.

104

Ibid.

105

Pelikan, 245.

The decree speaks highly of Scripture as “dictated, either by Christ’s own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.”¹⁰⁶ It was also said that Scripture was “the Holy Ghost dictating.” But what was Scripture? Scripture was those writings that “have been used to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate edition.” Synod “ordains and declares, that the said old and Vulgate edition, which, by the lengthened usage of so many years, has been approved of in the Church, be, in public lectures, disputations, sermons and expositions, held as authentic; and that no one is to dare, or presume to reject it under any pretext whatever.” The reason for the exclusive elevation of the Vulgate to the status of Scripture is obvious: the Vulgate “by the lengthened usage of so many years” was adjusted to the tradition of the Western church. The next logical step was to authorize the tradition itself.

The Synod declared that equal authority belongs to both “the written books, and the unwritten traditions.” The next step was the interpretation of Scripture. It was allowed to be interpreted in the sense “which holy mother Church,--whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures,--hath held and doth hold.” At the further proceedings of the Synod the Mother Church granted the authority of Scripture also to apocryphal writings: Ecclesiastes and the two books of the Maccabees, neglecting the question of antilegomena altogether. “But if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate edition; and knowingly and deliberately contemn the traditions aforesaid; let him be anathema.” The Council of Trent ended with three anathemas of all heretics.

From the formulations of the Council of Trent it is difficult to discern how many authorities there really are: Scripture, tradition, or Mother Church? Do they all have the same source of authority or there are several sources? Another curious point is that by that time there wasn’t an authoritative edition of the Vulgate. That was produced only a half century later in 1598 when the Clementine Vulgate became the standard Bible text of the Roman Catholic Church until 1979 (when the *Nova Vulgata* was promulgated). The Clementine Vulgate was far from accurate.¹⁰⁷ The authority of the Vulgate was limited to matters of faith and morals by Pius XII in the 20th century.¹⁰⁸

106

The quotations from the Council taken from:http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1545-1545_Concilium_Tridentinum_Canons_And_Decrees_EN.pdf/

107

Westcott, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/vulgate5.html/>

108

The authority of Vulgate was further explained by the Encyclical of pope Pius XII concerning the advancement of biblical studies. The document is dated Sept. 30, 1943, feast of St. Jerome, and it limits the authority of Vulgate to matters of faith and morals. “Hence this special authority or as they

After a careful examination of his Roman sources, Martin Chemnitz concludes that the Roman position was that Scriptures are not only “insufficient for faith and godly living” but also “obscure and ambiguous . . . an occasion of strife rather than the voice of a judge, a teacher who cannot speak, a dead letter, yes, a letter that kills, etc.”¹⁰⁹ Chemnitz also reports that Andrada had confessed that the true intentions of the council were not to be revealed to the public because “common people might be stirred up if the Holy Scripture were attacked with such harsh and hateful words.”¹¹⁰ This is so-called lip service which has been so common since Trent and the time of the Jesuits. In order to shed more light on the Roman position at the Council of Trent, Chemnitz says that “Jesuits held this axiom in common with other papalists, that the Holy Scripture is a mutilated, incomplete, and imperfect teaching, because it does not contain all that pertains to faith and to rules for pious living.”¹¹¹ What Chemnitz says here is that the official doctrine of the Roman church was just a clever political fabric not taken seriously in the practical life of church. That was confirmed in a personal experience of the author of this essay in a rather surprising way. In the first year of my studies for the Master of Theology degree at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Latvia I had to take a class on moral theology. The subject was presented by an elderly Dominican father who was popular and held in high esteem among Latvian Christians. He invited us to the St. Francis church to take the final test at the headquarters of the Roman Catholic seminary, at the end of the course of his lectures. I visited him together with a fellow student. In the midst of a friendly discussion on moral theology we came to a point of a disagreement and one of us presented an argument from the Old Testament. The Dominican father looked at us compassionately and said, “Sons, don’t take it seriously, it’s just Jewish propaganda!” To our surprised question, “What should be taken seriously?” the answer was, “The Mother Church!” Whatever one thinks about the phrase “Mother Church,” the attitude of the Dominican father reflects the switch of authority in humanism: “God’s Word is no longer the standard in humanism but is, rather judged by standard of humanistic culture.”¹¹² Humanistic skepticism has become part and parcel of the Roman church.

say, authenticity of the Vulgate was not affirmed by the Council particularly for critical reasons, but rather because of its legitimate use in the Churches throughout so many centuries; by which use indeed the same is shown, in the sense in which the Church has understood and understands it, to be free from any error whatsoever in matters of faith and morals; so that, as the Church herself testifies and affirms, it may be quoted safely and without fear of error in disputations, in lectures and in preaching; and so its authenticity is not specified primarily as critical, but rather as juridical.”
http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_30091943_divino-afflante-spiritu.html

109

Chemnitz, 46.

110

Ibid, 44.

111

Chemnitz, 43.

112

Linneman, 6.

It is useful to note that Gentian Hervet, humanist and secretary to the Cardinal of Lorraine, and participant at part of the Council of Trent, used Sextus to challenge various Protestants to debate with him and published a great many pamphlets against their views. Hervet viewed Sextus' work as an ideal for demolishing the new form of heretical dogmatism, that of Calvinism. "Hervet's employment of Pyrrhonism against Calvinism was soon to be shaped into a skeptical machine of war for use by the Counter-Reformation."¹¹³

Vatican II

Vatican II announced in its Preface that it is "following in the footsteps of the Council of Trent."¹¹⁴ Scripture and tradition "are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others. . . . Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation." Vatican II seemingly confirms the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture: "The books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation." As to the interpretation of Scripture the council decrees, "For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God." The authority of the Septuagint and the Vulgate were confirmed, and translations from the original languages encouraged so that lay people could be edified by reading Scripture. The first draft of the council's formulation stated, "Since divine inspiration extends to all things [in the Bible], it follows directly and necessarily that the entire Sacred Scripture is absolutely immune from error. By the ancient and constant faith of the Church we are taught that it is absolutely wrong to concede that a sacred writer has erred, since divine inspiration by its very nature excludes and rejects every error in every field, religious or profane. This necessarily follows because God, the supreme truth, can be the author of no error whatever."¹¹⁵ That was a good intention but the final draft sounds quite different: "Since . . . it must be equally held that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures."

Herman Sasse, who anticipated the Vatican II Council with great expectation, became completely disillusioned by the proceedings of the council. Ten years after the council, in what seems to be the last article in his life, Sasse first observes an

113

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/skepticism-history>

114

The quotation from the Vatican II here and after are taken from:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html

115

The quotation is taken from Lane, 4.

astonishingly superficial attitude toward the Old Testament. Then regarding the council's formulations on the authority of Scripture, tradition, and teaching authority of the Church, Sasse sadly comments that "thus instead of one or two sources, there are three . . . so the sola Scriptura of the Reformation is finally defeated."¹¹⁶ He also observes that if the Council of Trent ended with the burst of anathemas, which were used on all possible and impossible situations previously, there were no anathemas at Vatican II, which indicates that the Roman church has ceased to be a dogmatic church.¹¹⁷ "Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, the Second Vatican Council has been a turning point in the history of every church."¹¹⁸

The monster of uncertainty

Uncertainty was characteristic of Nominalism, Renaissance humanism, mysticism, and the greatest part of the Roman Church since the Medieval Ages. Uncertainty is characteristic also of rationalism, historicism, and even science. The reason for that is obvious: the human mind, historical research, and empirical knowledge can provide us with only a certain degree of probability, never with certainty. The most difficult part of that is that one seemingly cannot ignore the rational and historical side completely. The inability to ignore the changing realities of this world was one of the main reasons for the rising of biblical criticism. Although biblical criticism at the universities was entertained by academicians like Erasmus in growing numbers since the times of the Reformation, it became really dangerous when it made inroads into the church. The road was paved by ancient Greek skepticism which was tolerated and even patronized by the Roman church as the useful weapon against *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation.

The end result of biblical criticism in general, to put it in the words of a biblical scholar, is "a great deal of valuable but localized philological and historical knowledge, combined with crude generalizations and vague theological gestures."¹¹⁹ Joseph Ratzinger summarizes the devastating impact of the historical-critical method in Jesus research and the deplorable situation in which it has left Christians: "The impression that we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus. . . . This impression has by now penetrated deeply into the minds of the Christian people at large. This is a dramatic situation for faith, because its point of reference is being placed in doubt."¹²⁰ These are strange words coming from the pen of a Roman pope,

116

Sasse, 429.

117

Ibid, 432.

118

Ibid, 414.

119

Reno, 45.

120

Ratzinger, xii.

previously Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, although he indicates in the preface of his book *Jesus of Nazareth* that it is solely his personal search “for the face of the Lord” not an “exercise of the magisterium.”¹²¹ It is understandable because as the pope he couldn’t name doubt as the “dramatic situation for faith.” Why not? Because the whole Roman religious system is based on doubt!

To understand the role of doubt in the Roman religious system one has to understand Roman doctrine of grace.¹²² In principle, they speak of the atonement as an accomplished fact, but in reality to receive sanctifying grace one needs a certain measure of religious disposition as a condition for receiving grace, namely, penitence and a desire for improvement. Only the one who has the right disposition receives the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins which is distributed through the sacramental system of the Roman church. Since the disposition always is and must be uncertain, the working of the sacrament must be likewise. As a result, all the life of a believer is hovering between hope and fear: hope because power of the atonement is found in the sacraments; fear because one never knows if he has received it. Strictly speaking, only through Baptism, Absolution, and Unction does one have access to the atonement, according to Roman Catholic doctrine. There is no purpose, they think, to believe and hope in the atonement which is preached in the sermon because God will not give the fruit of the atonement there. God has accepted the atonement at the hand of Jesus as an occasion to institute the sacraments, where the next condition arises: right preparation. The Word, then, according to Roman teaching, gives no forgiveness. As a matter of course, this does not at all exclude very strong and beautiful words about the holiness of the Bible for spiritual life but these words do not mean that the Word is a means of grace in the Lutheran understanding. In view of that it is not the caprice of a theologian but a spiritual wisdom which prompts Adolf Hoenecke to start the subject on the means of salvation with the efficacy of the Divine Word.¹²³

“For a Roman Catholic neither the Word is listened to for forgiveness, nor are the sacraments received by trusting in the word about their content. It is even expressly forbidden to put one’s trust in the efficacy of the sacraments in that way. That would be an unwarranted and unspiritual presumptuousness. The certainty of salvation is likewise, therefore, forbidden in the Roman Church. Such a thing is considered an invitation to sleepiness and spiritual stagnation. Only uncertainty can keep spiritual life alive.”¹²⁴ Uncertainty is the great enemy of the Church’s faith and a peril to our

121

Ibid, xxiii.

122

Here I rely heavily on Hardt, 1985.

123

Hoenecke, 76.

124

Hardt, 1985.

society in general. That is a power of Antichrist which we have to face in our pastoral duties and everyday life. The term “inerrancy” is certainly the warning regarding which ways not to take. Fr. Tommy Lane, Professor of Sacred Scripture at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary, describes the difference between the Roman position and ours in the following way: “The teaching authority of the Church for Protestants rests not in the Pope but in the Scriptures. Therefore many Protestants see it necessary to assert the complete inerrancy of the Scriptures. In the Catholic Church the teaching authority rests with the Pope and Magisterium. Since Protestants reject the infallibility of both the Pope and the Church, they use the word ‘infallible’ increasingly of the Scriptures.”¹²⁵ The author of this essay believes we should do it even more.

Conclusions

The ancient pagan skepticism was never completely absent from the Western intellectual thought. It experienced rebirth in the late Middle Ages and has increasingly become dominating attitude towards reality. Sadly, it has increasingly made inroads also into the church destroying its dogmatic foundations. It does not take too much intellectual effort to see from the premises of skeptics that skepticism is self-defeating. If nothing is certain and true knowledge impossible, as Academic skepticism asserts, then nobody can be certain also that nothing is uncertain and true knowledge impossible. Pyrrhonians tried to be more consistent in their thinking acknowledging the problem. They rejected any dogmatism but again: rejection of dogmatism is nothing but a new conflicting dogma, a collision of two dogmas. By doubting their own position and developing the kind of skepticism which later was developed by Hume, skepticism leads to a complete epistemological darkness. A modern form of skepticism, logical positivism, tried to escape any metaphysics insisting that only empirical knowledge is meaningful but some of logical positivists themselves soon recognized that their central idea was not empirical, and consequently not meaningful. That was the end of logical positivism in the middle of the last century. Then on the stage of Western thought appeared postmodern skepticism with the claim that absolute truth does not exist. That position was self-defeating again since the assertion that there is only one truth that truth does not exist is obviously contradictory. Regardless of internal contradictions and being self-defeating, skepticism seems to be the unavoidable result of any consequent pursuit for knowledge in the contemporary world. At the same time, skepticism cannot escape dogmatism as an absolute non-empirical criterion is needed.¹²⁶ As

125

Lane, 2008, 6.

126

Popkin rightly observes: “The antithesis of skepticism... is ‘dogmatism,’ the view that evidence can be offered to establish that at least one nonempirical proposition cannot possibly be false. Like the sceptics who will be considered here, I believe that doubts can be cast on any such dogmatic claims and that such claims ultimately rest on some element of faith rather than evidence. If this is so, any dogmatic view becomes to some degree fideistic. However, if this could be

Archimedes' formula states, "Give me a place to stand, and I shall move the world." The common problem of Archimedes and a contemporary man is that they do not have a place to stand. When applied also to Scripture skeptical attitude has culminated in a complete abandonment of absolute truth and left men in epistemological darkness.

A couple of words have to be said also about us, confessional Lutherans. Our orthodox dogmatists were excellent in domesticating Aristotle and using the scholastic method as the handmaid of theology. That helped them to speak exactly and clearly, but had also a limiting impact. "Lutheran theology could not always be expressed in the fixed categories of such a method"¹²⁷ and sometimes our fathers were even victimized by their Aristotelian scholasticism. On the other hand, pietism as the reaction to the scholastic method left theology without strong and exact organizing principles which resulted at times in a wild subjectivity and sensitivity. The intellectual world is no less dangerous than the physical world, perhaps, even more dangerous. James Kittelson has pointed to the fact that although trained in the humanist ways, professors of the German Reformation after Luther were not the same as their humanist counterparts from before Luther. "But they were humanists, and at their hands true religion became a matter of learning in the sense that the head led the heart."¹²⁸ The heart burns when Scripture are rightly taught and explained, but head is slow to make right conclusions as the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus testifies (Lk. 24:30).

Finally I want to point to a 2008 Evangelical Lutheran Synod convention essay by professor Erling Teigen, "God's Power for Salvation: The Power of God's Word in Law and Gospel for the Christian Congregation."¹²⁹ It sheds light on the vital present-day questions on the authority and power of God's Word which are important for our pastoral work. As to the rest: our marvelous Lord Jesus Christ will give us courage and strength to continue "to agonize for the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

demonstrated, then the sceptic would be sure of something and would become a dogmatist." (Popkin, 2003, xxiii.)

127

Preus, 1955, 211.

128

Kittelson // The Harvest of Humanism in Central Europe, 157.

129

<http://els.org/resources/document-archive/convention-essays/essay2008-teigen/>

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