
Essay 5

**The virus and the Bible: how living with
HIV helps the Church to read it**

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Essay 5

The virus and the Bible: how living with HIV helps the Church to read it

Adrian Thatcher

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Theologians of all shades of opinion have called on the sources of theology (Bible, tradition, reason and experience) to provide a better understanding of the HIV pandemic. However, anyone sifting through the weight of theological material surrounding HIV in the last two decades may be struck by pervasiveness of negative and moralistic attitudes, both outside and inside the churches, towards people living with HIV. Such attitudes are very deeply rooted; and they will not be removed merely by being ignored. Rather, honest self-critical analysis and charitable confrontation may be required. In this paper I shall attempt two tasks: to explore ways in which particular readings of the Bible and tradition have conspired to oppress people living with HIV or AIDS; and to suggest how we might use these precious resources more wisely in the service of all God's people.

1. What silences need to be broken?

This paper was first delivered at a conference entitled 'Breaking the Silence'. We need, therefore, to ask what silences need to be broken. The theological literature grounded in caring for and ministry to HIV-positive people is full of reports about obstacles that first need to be overcome before caring and ministry can happen effectively. In 2003 UNAIDS initiated

a 'theological workshop' which aimed to identify 'those aspects of Christian theology that endorse or foster stigmatizing attitudes and behaviour towards people living with HIV and AIDS and those around them'.¹ It notes 'Historically the churches have often used the Bible for purposes of exclusion.'² Women's risk of infection is hugely increased by 'extensive theoretical and practical gender inequalities [...] unequal power-relations give women a subordinate position and make them submissive to men'.³

We need to ask how we ever got into this situation: for admission of fault must not stop us from enquiring into the causes of it. For example, a report on religious women in Malawi concluded that 'religious groups do little to nothing to change socially structured gender inequalities'. Religious institutions 'do little to support women' or lighten their 'multiple burdens'. Indeed, women's 'donkey work', as countenanced and indirectly supported by religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices regarding sexual activity, results in at-risk sexual behaviour, primarily sex work, as a means of sheer survival.⁴

That judgment could be made in many other countries. The very firmness of the churches' teaching about abstinence from pre-marital sex and fidelity in marriage, it is claimed, has underlined the false assumption that HIV infection is God's punishment for disobedience to God's law, irrespective of how the virus was contracted.⁵ The Nigerian theologian Teresa Okure compares the HI virus with two other, metaphorical, viruses, which she thinks are even more dangerous (assuming that to be possible): one 'assigns women an inferior status to men in society'; the other is 'global economic injustice'.⁶

¹ *A report of a theological workshop focusing on HIV- and AIDS-related stigma, 8th - 11th Dec. 2003, Windhoek, Namibia* (Geneva: UNAIDS, 2005), p. 11.

² *Ibid* p. 12.

³ Michael J. Kelly, S.J., *HIV and AIDS: A Justice Perspective* (Lusaka, Zambia: Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection, 2006), p. xiv (and see pp. 26-31).

⁴ Sally H. Rankin, Teri Lindgren, William W. Rankin, Joyce Ng'oma, 'Donkey Work: Women, Religion, and HIV/AIDS in Malawi', *Health Care for Women International*, 26 [4-16], 2005, pp. 14, 13.

⁵ Dorothy Scarborough, 'HIV/AIDS: The Response of the Church', *Journal of Constructive Theology*, 7.1, July 2001 [3-16].

⁶ See Claire Foster, 'Disease, Suffering, and Sin: One Anglican's Perspective', *Christian Bioethics*, 12 [157-63], 2005. p. 160, summarising Okure's essay in J. Gollither ed., *Healing God's Creation: the Global Anglican Congress on the Steward of Creation* (Morehouse: Harrisburg, PA, 2004).

The churches are unanimous (and in my view right) in commending marriage, but marriage (as Isabel Phiri reminds us) 'is also the centre of patriarchy, which constructs the subordinate position of African women'.⁷ We are sadly at fault if, in our enthusiasm for marriage, we do not also celebrate the transition from patriarchal to egalitarian marriage, and let the 'new life in Christ' that we proclaim thoroughly transform our gender inequities.

2. The Bible as a source of suffering

We can no longer suppress the question of why the churches need to overcome so much in their own practice. That is a huge and multifaceted topic. Part of the answer, I shall suggest, is that the Bible and our tradition are heavily incriminated in these multiple oppressions. The powerlessness of wives in relation to their husbands is straightforward biblical teaching, despite the fact that it is a huge source of distress for millions of women. 'Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.' (Eph.5:24) Tradition colludes with scripture in denying to women an appropriate place in the liturgy, in holy orders or in the episcopate. (1Tim.2:8-15) Exclusion is bad enough for the excluded: but there is worse. When the world perceives the inadequacy of the arguments in favour of retaining an exclusive, penis-endowed priesthood, how can it find the Church attractive, or even fit to be taken seriously? Worse still, how is gender inequality to be tackled at its theological roots when the churches themselves do not practise gender equality (apparently because they do not believe in it)?

Isabel Phiri says: 'The major problem of African Christians is their uncritical reading of the Bible'.⁸ There are readings of the Bible that reinforce these as well as other lamentable policies and practices. Unfortunately these readings have long been the dominant ones. It is time

⁷ Isabel Apawo Phiri, 'HIV/AIDS: An African Theological Response in Mission', *The Ecumenical Review*, 56.4 [422-31], 2004, p. 425.

⁸ *Ibid* p. 427.

that we Protestants (who have been taught that the 'plain sense' of scripture can be read off its pages) should learn to re-think what we do with the Bible.⁹

The literature on HIV shows remarkable attempts to read the Bible differently. In KwaZulu-Natal, for example, a group of women (inspirationally-led by Beverley Haddad) created a 'safe, sequestered' site, away from 'the surveillance and control of patriarchy', where eventually the 'hidden discourse' of rape, violence, poverty and exclusion could percolate through into 'the public domain'. 'Contextual Bible study' was then possible, requiring 'a commitment to read the Bible critically from a particular perspective'.¹⁰ The stories, say, of the rape of Tamar (2 Sam.13:1-22) and of the woman with a haemorrhage (Mk.5:21-43) could then elicit extraordinary theological understanding from the participants themselves.¹¹

As a resource to be utilised in discussion groups and workshops about sexuality and HIV, Manoj Kurian advocates a threefold model for the interpretation of the Bible: 'literal, convenient and contextual'.¹² He finds the simple use of the model helps to relativise literalism and so to articulate responsible interpretation. Hyunju Bae, a Korean woman theologian, describes the 'Janus-faced' function of the Bible in Asia both as a (welcome) source of salvation and liberation, and as a (deeply unhelpful) sourcebook 'to promote the Christian contempt of the indigenous religions and cultures of the "Other"'.¹³ Bae proposes 'a hermeneutics of compassion in detachment [...] which involves a critical assessment of what the Bible did

⁹ Worldwide Anglicanism is currently tearing itself apart over a related issue. To a majority, it seems obvious that scripture forbids homosexual love. To the rest of us, these readings are a betrayal of the Spirit of Christ.

¹⁰ Beverley Haddad, "Living It Out: Faith Resources and Sites as Critical to Participatory Learning with Rural South African Women", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Spring 2006, Vol. 22 Issue 1, pp. 136, 145

¹¹ *Ibid* pp. 146-53.

¹² Manoj Kurian, "The HIV and AIDS Pandemic: Changing Perceptions on Sexuality in Faith Communities", *The Ecumenical Review*, 56.4, October 2004 [432-6], p. 435.

¹³ Hyunju Bae, "Dancing around Life: An Asian Woman's Perspective", *The Ecumenical Review*, 56.4, Oct. 2004 [390-403], pp. 390-1.

and does, and a sympathetic retrieval of the meanings one can construct from the creative interpretation' of it.¹⁴ These micro-practices are admirable. They free the Bible from patriarchy. They allow the experience of readers to interrogate the text.

In my forthcoming book, *The Savage Text*, I have charted the misuse of the Bible against minorities.¹⁵ The list includes homosexuals, slaves, people of colour, women, children, witches, the disabled, Jews, and so on. Two brief examples must suffice. The first is the Genesis narrative describing the curse of Ham/Canaan. (Gen. 9:18-27) In 1862 a man born in the United States to freed slaves claimed that the divine curse upon black people was the 'general, almost universal, opinion in the Christian world'. He found it:

...in books written by learned men; and it is repeated in lectures, speeches, sermons, and common conversation. So strong and tenacious is the hold which it has taken upon the mind of Christendom, that it seems almost impossible to uproot it. Indeed, it is an almost foregone conclusion, that the Negro race is an accursed race, weighed down, even to the present, beneath the burden of an ancestral malediction.¹⁶

This is frightening testimony to the power of the Bible, inadequately understood, to endorse outrageous readings that justify unspeakable acts of cruelty, injustice and murder. The second example is the killing spree by the Scottish Presbyterians of witches in Scotland. In this small, under-populated country, between 1590 and 1670, the Protestant Kirk ensured the death of over a thousand victims (not counting hundreds more who killed themselves or died awaiting trial).¹⁷ One of

¹⁴ Bae, *op cit*, p. 391 (author's emphasis).

¹⁵ Adrian Thatcher, *The Savage Text* (Malden, Mass. & Oxford, UK: Blackwell-Wiley: October 2008).

¹⁶ Alexander Crummell, 'The Negro Race Not under a Curse: An Examination of Genesis IX. 25', in *The Future of Africa, being Addresses, Sermons, etc., etc., Delivered in the Republic of Liberia* (New York: 1862), pp. 327-8: cited in Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham - Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 176.

¹⁷ And this is a conservative estimate. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided - 1490 - 1700* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 563-75.

the 'drivers' of this persecution was the biblical text: 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live'. (Ex.22:18)

The stigmatizing treatment of HIV positive people belongs to a long and sad tradition of biblical exegesis, found in Christianity's darker side, which converts the Bible into a savage text. This counter-Christian tradition lies at the heart of Christianity itself. In addressing it, we need to return to the distinction between – on the one hand – God-the-Word, made flesh in Jesus Christ (Jn.1:14); and, on the other hand, the words of the scriptures. God comes into the world, in Person, in the flesh of Christ. That *is* the Christian faith. It is Christ who is God's Word, and even the well-intentioned habit of speaking devotionally of the Bible as 'the Word of God' obfuscates the pre-eminent position of Jesus Christ as the final and unalterable revelation of the Triune God.

In its most recent attempts to discuss sexuality, the House of Bishops of the Church of England sets out two views of the Bible that co-exist among Anglicans: the *guidebook* view and the *witness* view. Anglicans, they explain, see the Bible 'as providing normative guidance for their sexual conduct'. And they see it this way because of the status they give 'to the Bible as a whole as pointing to Christ, through whom God has revealed to his people what he is like, what he has done for them, and how they should respond to him'. But if the Bible is already our guide, what need do we have of Jesus Christ? That is why the *guidebook* view is finally idolatrous and it becomes necessary to re-establish the *witness* view.

In 1600 the Anglican theologian Richard Hooker found it necessary to combat the bibliolatry (or bible worship) of Puritans who wanted biblical warrant for everything. This included the abolition of Christmas Day, which was a papist feast without biblical warrant. Hooker (rightly) committed himself to the 'witness view'. Both Tes-

¹⁸ House of Bishops' Group on 'Issues in Human Sexuality', *Some issues in human sexuality: A guide to the debate* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003), 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 (p. 37).

taments, he taught, are alike in bearing witness to Christ; where they differ is on how they do it:

So that the general end both of Old and New is one; the difference between them consisting in this, that the Old did make wise by teaching salvation through Christ that *should* come, the New by teaching that Christ the Saviour *is* come.¹⁹

This re-positioning of the Bible in relation to Christ will be difficult to accomplish; but in this 21st century, when the revelation of unbounded love is continually compromised, it is essential that Christians are aware of the need to achieve it. In doing so, I think the contextual Bible study method, or the practice of compassion in detachment, is the right approach. For example, Renita Weems, an elder of the African Methodist Church, describes how African slaves in the United States devised a simple, yet sophisticated hermeneutic. Slave-masters especially feared the revolutionary potential of the scriptures, so knowledge of these was mediated through the slave-masters themselves, and also through black churches which had been specifically set up for the slaves.²⁰ Generally speaking, the slaves were (rightly) wary of any interpretation of the Gospel that oppressed them. Weems explains: 'What the slave-masters did not foresee, however, was that the very material they forbade the slaves from touching and studying with their hands and eyes, the slaves learned to claim and study through the powers of listening and memory.'²¹

For Afro-Americans, continues Weems, 'it is not texts *per se* that function authoritatively. Rather, it is reading strategies, and more precisely, *particular* readings that turn out, in fact, to be authoritative'.²² Faced with the cacophony of Protestant voices proclaiming their competing conversion narratives, the slaves knew that not all of these voices

¹⁹ Richard Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity Books I – IV* (ed. E. Rhys), *Volume 1* (London: J.M. Dent, 1907, reprinted 1925, Everyman's Library), 1.14.3, p. 217 (emphasis added).

²⁰ Renita J. Weems, "Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible," in Cain Hope Felder (ed.), *Stony the Road We Trod – African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) [57-80], p.60.

²¹ *Ibid* p.61.

²² *Ibid* p.64.

could be right. Thus, before they could even read the Bible for themselves, their experience led them to the Exodus and other narratives and to a sense of liberation that continues to the present day.

So the Bible has not been read in a Christ-centred manner; and all our churches have (at one time or another) used the Bible for the purposes of exclusion. This is the background to the observation in the theological framework that emerged from the UNAIDS theological workshop on stigma, which said: 'Since God's abiding concern is for our well-being or fullness of life, *no passage from Scripture should be used to diminish this in any other human being*'.²³ 'Readings of the Bible must be Christ-centred,' it goes on to say, 'and linked to the context in which we find ourselves'. The habit of reading the Bible to justify rejection or exclusion is embedded in several types of conservative Christianity, and charitable confrontation with them is inevitable.

3. Tradition as a burden

It will come as no surprise, then, that I propose to treat tradition in a similar way.²⁴ I will take just two examples, and in the final sections suggest a way of handling both the Bible and tradition that better equips us for faithful living.

The first example is the association between sickness and punishment for sin. In the Church of England Book of Common Prayer, The Order for the Visitation of the Sick contains the following exhortation:

Dearly beloved, know this, that Almighty God is the Lord of life and death, and of all things to them pertaining, as youth, strength, health, age, weakness, and sickness. Wherefore, whatsoever your sickness is, *know you certainly, that it is God's visitation*. And for *what cause soever* this sickness is sent unto you; whether it be to *try your patience for the example of others*, and that *your faith* may be found in the day of the Lord *laudable, glorious, and honourable*, to the increase of glory and endless

²³ Weems, *op cit*, p.13 (emphasis added).

²⁴ Many questions are, of course, begged, not least what it is, and how it is thought to develop.

felicity; or else it be sent unto you to correct and amend in you whatsoever doth offend the eyes of your heavenly Father; know you certainly, that if you truly repent you of your sins, and bear your sickness patiently, trusting in God's mercy, for his dear Son Jesus Christ's sake, and render unto him humble thanks for his fatherly visitation, submitting yourself wholly unto his will, it shall turn to your profit, and help you forward in the right way that leadeth unto everlasting life.²⁵

My second example is contraception. According to Christian tradition, contraception is not just *wrong*, but the practice of it is tantamount to *murder*. This doctrine, which is found in Chrysostom,²⁶ Aquinas,²⁷ and in the Roman Catholic canon law *Si aliquis*,²⁸ has been notoriously re-established by new natural law theorists at the present time.²⁹ *Humanae vitae* is actually a liberalization of this tradition, basing the wrongness of contraception not on the charge of murder, but on 'the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act'.³⁰ Forty years on from *Humanae vitae*, is it not time to push the development of thinking about contraception a stage further?

But Protestants can't afford to be smug about contraception: Calvin, after all, re-affirmed the condemnation of any form of contraception.³¹ Let's also be clear: the tradition condemns masturbation on similar grounds. Calvin taught that Onan deserved to die for the crime of the unproductive discharge of semen (not simply the practice of *coitus*

²⁵ emphases added

²⁶ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 24 on the Epistle to the Romans*, PG 60, 626-627. Translation in John T. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, MA: The Bellknap Press of Harvard University, 1965), p. 96.

²⁷ *Summa contra gentiles*, 3, 122.

²⁸ Text in *Corpus iuris canonici*, eds. A. L. Richter and A. Friedberg (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1881), 2, 794.

²⁹ Germain Grisez, John Finnis, Joseph Boyle, and William E. May, "Every Marital Act Ought to Be Open to New Life': Toward a Clearer Understanding," *The Thomist* 52.3 (1988), pp. 365-426.

³⁰ Pope Paul VI, *Humanae vitae* (1968), 12. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html

³¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, Ch. 38: 9,10; quoted in Charles D. Provan, *The Bible and Birth Control* (Monongahela, PA: Zimmer Printing, 1989), p. 15.

interruptus).³² Wasted semen? There is more than enough semen in the world! While Calvin uses the Onan narrative to accuse masturbators of a crime worthy of death, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith observe: 'Both the Magisterium of the Church, in the course of a constant tradition, and the moral sense of the faithful have been in no doubt and have firmly maintained that masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action.'³³ Here is another case of a strand of tradition crying out for further development.

4. The spiral and the score

In the example from the Book of Common Prayer, it should be clear Christian tradition *does* assert the close association of sickness and sin. Sickness is 'God's visitation'. There are reasons why God sends it (known only to God) and they include the learning of exemplary patience, the increase in and witness of faith, and opportunities for repentance and the purgation of sin. On the one hand the association of sickness and sin is defensible: it is, after all, in the Prayer Book! But let us remember that in 1549, when this was written, people believed in evil spirits; they believed that illnesses and all manner of malevolence could strike as the result of a spell, or a stare from an 'evil eye' or the calling up of magic. People had no idea about viruses, no access to the medical understanding which we now take for granted. In those circumstances they would have found genuine comfort in the assurance that God had sent a sickness, that it was not the consequence of a curse or an evil spirit. What these pious authors were doing was to attempt to make theological sense of sickness in a pre-scientific world. On the other hand this prayer is almost useless for pastoral purposes. The conceptual world of their authors is long gone, and cannot conceivably be ours.

³² 'The voluntary spilling of semen *outside of intercourse between a man and a woman* is a monstrous thing. Deliberately to withdraw from coitus in order that semen may fall on the ground is doubly monstrous.' (Provan, *The Bible and Birth Control*, p. 15, emphasis added)

³³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona humana: Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics* (1975), 9. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19751229_persona-humana_en.html. Reaffirmed in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), 2352.

In the case of contraception, what has happened is that a tradition intended to promote life has now become an obstacle to survival. Christian approaches to contraception were forged in a time when no one knew how babies were made; a time when sexual intercourse was justified for propagation only (often in periods of intense anxiety about human survival); and a time when Christian concern for living children extended naturally to the unborn. Today, how can a Church which tells the world it is 'pro-life' deny vulnerable people one of the means they need to stay alive? How can it officially deny the pleasure and relief of masturbation, at least to those who are trying to remain free of HIV and to practice pre-marital chastity in accordance with church teaching? Here is another case of the disjunction, not only of conceptual worlds, but of centuries.

5. The spiral...

Joseph Monti, in his splendid work *Arguing about Sex*, advocates a model of doctrinal development which copes well with this obvious disjunction between past and present:

The denominations are forgetting how the obligation of fidelity [to tradition] must be dialectically engaged with the equal obligation of contemporaneity – how Christian life must make sense in its own time, must be truthful and right-making, and promote the good in whatever world we find ourselves.³⁴

Since the Church is a trans-historical body, it spans more than one 'cosmological world', and so cannot remain identified with any particular period, or cultural manifestation of itself, and especially not with our own contemporary world.³⁵ We are not simply passive tradition-receivers but active tradition-makers, as ever-new social, cultural and global problems cause us to examine what we have already received, and to reshape it in the light both of our own questions, and of the

³⁴ Joseph Monti, *Arguing about Sex: The Rhetoric of Christian Sexual Morality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 5.

³⁵ *Ibid* p. 21.

Spirit's guidance, so that it bears the stamp of our own Christian identity when we pass it on to our children to appropriate differently for themselves. Remembering, reading and affirming the Christian tradition is like belonging on:

...an advancing spiral that constantly loops back as a precondition of advancement. This looping remembrance sets a continuity with the past that is internally necessary for the shape of the spiral and its advancement toward an anticipated future. However, when set in motion, such advancing spirals create new and discontinuous centers and radii. With this continuing recombination of the dimensions of continuity and discontinuity that mark historical experience, an historical foundation and model for critical discourse and argument is attained.³⁶

6. ...and the score

We Christians will not be faithful if we apply yesterday's answers to today's and tomorrow's questions, especially when they are related to a problem which is as grave as the HIV pandemic. Derived from the global North, a rather different model of Bible reading may be found in Stephen Barton's question:

What if the Bible is more like the text of a Shakespearean play or the score of a Beethoven symphony, where true interpretation involves *corporate performance and practical enactment*, and where the meaning of the text or score will vary to some degree from one performance to another...?³⁷

The emphasis on 'corporate performance and practical enactment' is easily translatable into different contexts. It highlights our active responsibility for what we do with the Bible, and also the frightful mess that both we and our unrehearsed orchestra or troupe of actors can make of it.

³⁶ Monti, *op cit*, p. 61.

³⁷ Stephen C. Barton, 'Is the Bible Good News for Human Sexuality? Reflections on Method in Biblical Interpretation?', in Adrian Thatcher and Elizabeth Stuart (eds), *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing / Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans: 1996) [4-13], p. 6 (emphasis added).

We, the community of readers, are shaped by scripture and tradition. But we will read our scriptures and our tradition in our present context, and our present context will also shape how we will read scripture and tradition. Being faithful to Christ in the time of HIV entails a 'No' to all those accretions and assumptions that compromise that great love that was poured into the world through His Cross. Looked at against the ebb and flow of history, HIV constitutes one of those discontinuities that renders all theodicies inadequate, and for that very reason requires us to wait afresh upon the Spirit who 'will guide you into all the truth'. (Jn.16:13)

All the critical remarks in this paper are directed towards the removal of obstacles and inhibitors that hinder the full flow of that divine love which the churches are seeking to embody in their ministry and mission among people living with HIV and AIDS. The Chair of the Health Commission of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India said:

All the Catholic healthcare institutions, as we are serving the Lord in the abandoned and afflicted, will admit and care for the people living with HIV or AIDS. As Blessed Teresa of Calcutta used to say, 'a person affected by HIV and AIDS is Jesus among us. How can we say no to Him?'³⁸

Who cannot be moved by that care, not confined to Catholicism, and by the simple yet profound theology that inspires and sustains it? Jesus said 'Truly I tell you: anything you did for one of my brothers here, however insignificant, you did for me.' (Mt.25:40) In ministering to poverty-stricken and sick people, Christians find they are ministering to the Christ who is already with them awaiting recognition. But that is not all. Such people also minister in Christ's name to the theologians, the guardians of traditions, the Church leaders, the biblical interpreters, and all those who cling on to damaging uses of scripture and tradition with little thought of the consequences of what they do.

³⁸ Cited in report of theological workshop (see note 1), p. 23.