

Research Article

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The Authority of the Bible and the Church Fathers in Adolf von Harnack's Thought

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Abstract: This article begins with an analysis of Adolf von Harnack's research on biblical and patristic sources in regard to the development of the authoritative church. I provide a close textual analysis of Harnack's *The Origin of the New Testament and the Most Important Consequences of the New Creation* (1914). This analysis shows that Harnack regarded biblical and patristic sources as extremely meaningful, as they provide a trustworthy account of the origins of Christianity, but they were also open to critical analysis. I continue this investigation with a close textual reading of Harnack's correspondence with Karl Barth from 1923, in which the two theologians discussed, among other topics, the possibility of talking about God. I argue that we should place Harnack's analysis of the biblical and patristic sources within a broader epistemological reflection on the possibilities of human knowledge, to which Harnack dedicated a great deal of attention, even if he did not develop it systematically in his vast literary production.

Keywords: Adolf von Harnack, Karl Barth, authority, biblical sources, patristic sources, epistemology, philosophy of religion

1 Introduction

In this article, I analyze Adolf von Harnack's (1851–1930) view of the authority of the Bible and the Church Fathers by focusing on his presentation of the origins and the development of the New Testament. I then suggest that we must understand his evaluation of the biblical and patristic sources in the context of his reflection on epistemology, which he did not develop systematically, but which we can still find in some of his lesser-known texts.

Harnack worked extensively with biblical and patristic sources, especially in the well-known *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (1886).¹ In this work, Harnack analyzed the origin (*Entstehung*) and development (*Entwicklung*) of dogma.² He argued that dogma changed continuously, according to the cultural conditions in which the church found itself.³ In this respect, Harnack famously affirmed that dogma is the outcome of the work of the Greek spirit on the material of the Gospel, and he became then widely known for the thesis

1 The work was published in three volumes in German. I consider here the first volume, which mainly deals with the origin and development of Christian doctrine up until the third century: Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1. In this article, I refer to this work with the English title Harnack, *History of Dogma*.

2 Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1, 3.

3 Ibid., 12.

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of the Hellenization of Christianity.⁴ During his long career, Harnack was a prolific author in the field of biblical and patristic studies.

In this article, however, I focus on Harnack's *Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments und die wichtigsten Folgen der neuen Schöpfung* (1914), which has received less attention than his more famous work *History of Dogma*.⁵ Harnack explained the different goals of these two books in relation to the analysis of the New Testament: while in the *History of Dogma* he dealt with the origins of the New Testament in relation to the history of dogma, in *The Origin of the New Testament* he focused on the creation of the Canon. He described his goal as to provide a "more comprehensive and clear-cut discussion of the chief points in the story of the development, and of the motive forces at work [...] and to state more forcibly the consequences of the creation of the New Testament."⁶

The Origin of the New Testament offers insight into Harnack's reception of biblical and patristic sources, as in this context Harnack focused on the description of the origin and the creation of the Canon and patristic exegetical literature. With a close textual reading of selected passages, I hope to show that Harnack regarded the biblical and patristic sources as providing a precise account of the origins of Christianity, and the patristic exegetical literature a necessary explanation of the difficult passages in the Canon. This point is particularly important if we consider that the debate on the validity of biblical sources got heated during the nineteenth century in Germany, especially through the famous work of Harnack's senior colleague David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874), *Das Leben Jesu* (1835).⁷ I stress Harnack's own emphasis on the authority of the Church as a key element for the development of the biblical and patristic literature, and as the aspect that meant that this literature was simultaneously open to criticism. In this same text, Harnack frequently reflected on the development of biblical and patristic sources on a theoretical level, reflecting on the *meaning* that the creation of the New Testament and patristic literature had and challenging its authority *vis-à-vis* the limits of human understanding.

Harnack did not consider himself a philosopher and, for this reason, he did not develop a philosophical theory on epistemology or a system.⁸ However, I contend that several of his works nonetheless include some reflections of a philosophical and, in particular, epistemological nature. For the purpose of the present article, I have selected Harnack's correspondence with the much younger Karl Barth (1886–1968) from 1923.⁹ This rich and interesting text will serve the purpose of providing the theoretical framework for the analysis of Harnack's reflection on the reception of biblical and patristic sources.

⁴ "Das Dogma ist in seiner Konzeption und in seinem Ausbau ein Werk des griechischen Geistes auf dem Boden des Evangeliums" (ibid., 18).

⁵ Harnack, *Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments und die wichtigsten Folgen der neuen Schöpfung*. The translation into English is Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament and the Most Important Consequences of the New Creation*.

⁶ Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament*, XV–XVI.

⁷ For an overview on the nineteenth-century criticism of authority and the rise of biblical criticism, see Lincicum, "Criticism and Authority;" and Zachhuber, "The Historical Turn." For a thorough analysis of Strauss's research and its impact on his contemporary background, see the following books: Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany*; Harris, *The Tübingen School*; Hodgson, *The Formation of Historical Theology*.

⁸ An example of Harnack's skepticism toward philosophy is found in Harnack, "Über Wissenschaft und Religion." Harnack argued that philosophy could be an object of history, meaning that philosophy can be studied historically, but history can never be philosophical because history is the sole discipline that has the status of science (*Wissenschaft*). This also meant that Harnack considered theology a science only if theology was historical. Cf. Harnack, "Stufen wissenschaftlicher Erkenntnis."

⁹ The correspondence was published by the journal *Christliche Welt* in the early months of 1923. I use here Martin Rumscheidt's (1935) monograph from 1972, where the author presented a translation in English and an analysis of the correspondence. Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*.

2 Adolf von Harnack's perspective on history

Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930) was born in Dorpat, Estonia, where his family was part of a German minority.¹⁰ His father, Theodosius Harnack (1817–1889), was a prominent academic educated at the Erlangen School.¹¹ Adolf von Harnack received a thorough education in Church History and Classics, and he became a prominent Church historian of his age, widely known thanks to his prolific literary activity and the demanding projects on which he worked throughout his life, which involved the deep and scientific study of early Christianity.¹² Harnack developed this approach thanks also to his very influential mentor, Moritz von Engelhardt (1828–1881), who introduced a very young Harnack to the historical–critical method and textual criticism. In turn, Engelhardt appreciated and adhered to the idea of history and of historical methodology upheld by the famous German scholar Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). The discussion on history as an academic discipline, which finally gained autonomous status at universities, and the discussion on its methodology are part of the broader process of the “rise of historicism.” Such discussion provides the background for our analysis in this article.¹³ Historicism posed several questions that entailed critical analysis of human knowledge and of the “structure” of reality: did historical phenomena have a transcendent meaning that fit within a divine plan or were they nothing more than a chaotic plurality of events with no logical structure and unity? Is humanity leaning toward progress in general? The discussion on the theoretical presuppositions of historical analysis therefore had relevant consequences for the way nineteenth-century intellectuals shaped their concept of “reality.”¹⁴

I contend that Harnack played a role in this broader debate, even if he did not write systematically on these topics. In this regard, it is true that he wrote extensively on early Christianity from the perspective of a historian who dealt comprehensively and scientifically with the historical sources available at his time.¹⁵ As he himself said in several speeches, history is science (*Wissenschaft*) and should not blend with philosophy;

10 On Harnack's life and work see the monographs: Zahn-Harnack, *Adolf von Harnack*; Glick, *The Reality of Christianity*; Nottmeier, *Adolf von Harnack und die deutsche Politik 1890–1980*. Harnack received his training in Dorpat between 1869 and 1872 and then moved to Leipzig where he first completed his doctoral studies and training in church history (1872–1874). His academic career started in Leipzig, and over the years, he moved to Giessen (1878–1886) and Marburg (1886–1888) and was finally appointed in Berlin (1888 until his retirement in 1921).

11 Glick noted the Lutheran orthodoxy was a prominent influence in the universities of Dorpat and Erlangen, where Harnack received his early training. The influence of Theodosius was central in Harnack's education, and Harnack debated with his father on theological questions through his entire life. See: Glick, “Nineteenth Century Theological and Cultural Influences on Adolf Harnack,” 157–63.

12 Among Harnack's influential and prolific intellectual activity, I limit my presentation to three important projects in which he took part. The first is *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Litteratur* with Oscar von Gebhardt (Giessen, 1882), which aimed to reach a conclusion on authorship in early Christianity. The second is the editorial enterprise *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* (Berlin, from 1893), where Harnack was part of the committee that initiated the project of producing a new edition of the Greek Church Fathers. Finally, Harnack started the *Chronologie der altchristliche Literatur bis Eusebius* (Berlin, 1897–1904), which was an inventory of ancient Christian literature up to Eusebius – it included description, dating, and placing of the works of the authors from early Christianity.

13 The literature on this topic is complex. For a study on the term “historicism,” see Lee and Beck, “The Meaning of ‘Historicism’.” For an overview on the study of history and philosophy of history before the nineteenth century, see Nadel, “Philosophy of History before Historicism.” For an analysis of one of the most important authors of the historicist tradition, see Berding, “Leopold von Ranke.”

14 In this respect, it is well known that authors such as Ranke, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), and Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884) focused on the “individual” and “concrete realities” of history and opposed their understanding of history to that of thinkers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). The authors of the “historicist” tradition denied the existence of a general plan of history or scheme understandable to human beings. Nevertheless, these authors often maintained theological assumptions such as the existence of God, which gives meaning and unity to the historical narrative. Cf. Davaney, *Historicism*, 21–32. Harnack discussed the meaning and the rules of history in Harnack, “Was hat die Historie an fester Erkenntnis zur Deutung des Weltgeschehens zu bieten?”

15 See Harnack's discussion of the state of art at the beginning of Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, vol. 1. In this article, I refer to this work with the English title Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, vol. 1.

otherwise, it loses its scientific character. However, I think that one can clearly see Harnack's intellectual and theoretical reflections on history, theology, and philosophy by going through his several volumes of speeches and lectures, named *Reden und Aufsätze*,¹⁶ and his correspondence with Barth, which I have selected for this work. These lectures, speeches, and letters should not be considered philosophical treatises in which Harnack took a solid position in terms of a specific philosophical orientation. However, these works offer insight into Harnack's thoughts on his methodology and his theoretical presuppositions. The contradiction concerning philosophy is apparent: Harnack often identified philosophy with Hegelian philosophy, and he was mainly concerned with a presentation of historical narration that could be as objective as possible.¹⁷ In other words, he claimed that historical investigation should be free from the influence of any philosophical schema that would undermine the scientific interpretation of historical facts. The American scholar Wayne G. Glick (1921–2015) rightly observed that, during his early years of study, Harnack set the existential question that would guide his research for years to come: how to be a disciple of Jesus.¹⁸ This reflection on how to be a disciple of Jesus was, to use Glick's words, a study on the *reality* of Christianity. I therefore argue that Harnack's "existential" question inevitably led him to delve into topics that are, technically speaking, epistemological. In this regard, I argue that Harnack's lifelong study of biblical and patristic sources was not owing to mere erudition, but was part of his broader understanding of human knowledge and reality.

So far, I have explained why I think we can develop our understanding of Harnack's critical discussion of biblical and patristic sources together with philosophical–epistemological research. Before moving to the actual analysis of the texts, I want to highlight one last, fundamental, aspect of our discussion. Harnack's use of the biblical and patristic sources is complex and far from a simplistic opposition to tradition. Rather, Harnack *challenged* tradition as he urged a profound examination of the documents produced on the message of Jesus, which, in other words, according to his analysis, meant questioning the validity of the knowledge produced by other theologians and thinkers over the subsequent centuries. This point is, ultimately, linked with the concept of authority. In the *History of Dogma* and *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, Harnack described thoroughly the development of the church during the first three centuries, which, for him, was the most interesting age to consider for historical investigation, as this age witnessed the passage from "primitive" Christian communities to a progressively structured and institutionalized authority.¹⁹ This process, as Harnack described it extensively in his work, was at its core an intellectualization of what he understood to be a spontaneous and original faith, whose complexity increased as more time passed from Jesus's preaching.²⁰

¹⁶ We have already mentioned these collections above: Harnack, *Reden und Aufsätze*, vol. 2; Harnack, *Erforschtes und Erlebtes*, vol. 4.

¹⁷ The relation to Hegelian philosophy was a broader problem for the nineteenth-century intellectuals working on history. In this regard, historicist thinkers often criticized Hegel for having presented a philosophy of history detached from the use of historical sources. Hegel's system and its eventual application to biblical sources was also debated among the scholars of the School of Tübingen. Some of the many contributions on this topic are the already mentioned works: Zachhuber, *Theology as Science*; Davaney, *Historicism*; Harris, *The Tübingen School*; Hodgson, *The Formation of Historical Theology*.

¹⁸ Cf. Glick, "Nineteenth Century," 158.

¹⁹ Harnack considered the first three centuries to be an understudied field of research, also because of the difficulties presented by the material available at his time. Cf. Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums*, vol. 1, V–VIII. In the first pages of the *History of Dogma*, Harnack explained that the doctrine of faith is established between the third and the fourth centuries; because of this reason, he considered the first three centuries as a key period to study Christianity. Cf. Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1, 3–7.

²⁰ This is also the core of Harnack's critical description of the process of the Hellenization of Christianity. The concept of authority in Harnack's presentation of early Christianity is, of course, directly connected with the Hellenization of Christianity. However, the process of Hellenization is a broader and complex concept, which also entails the development of Christian dogmatics. I will not delve into this discussion here. For a discussion of the term "Hellenization" with a reference to Harnack, see Marksches, *Hellenisierung des Christentums*; Marksches, "Does it Make Sense to Speak about a 'Hellenization of Christianity' in Antiquity?" For an overview on the history of the term, see Bartolomei, *Ellenizzazione del cristianesimo*; and Crouse, "The Hellenization of Christianity."

Harnack considered theology to be historical; therefore, he looked at the role of the theologian as critically engaging with this intellectualization and bringing to light the authentic message of Jesus's preaching. In this article, I begin the analysis with Harnack's examination of the development of the Canon *vis-à-vis* the rise of the authoritative church. I anticipate that Harnack answered the question on how the Church arrived at a second authoritative Canon by observing that "[a] mass of Christian works had come into existence of extremely varied content (especially the Gnostic writings), some of which advanced high claims to authority and often afforded grievous scandal to simple believers."²¹ This point entailed a reflection on what orthodoxy and Catholicism meant for the first Christians.²² Given this complex situation, Harnack emphasized that it was necessary for the believers to receive a solid and certain document concerning the teaching of Jesus on which everyone could agree. We will then see how Harnack reflected, in the same text, on the process of the development of patristic exegetical literature.

3 Adolf von Harnack: The origins of the New Testament

Harnack's attitude toward biblical and patristic sources was not a mere rejection of tradition. Rather, his presentation of the origins of the New Testament shows that he took a critical and ambivalent position toward it. At the beginning of the text on the origins of the New Testament, Harnack posed several research questions. I offer here paraphrases of the most central points: what reason did the early Christians have for creating a second Testament, given the existence of the first? Why did they create four Gospels instead of one? Does this literature give an account of Jesus' revelation, and what grounds do we have to say that Revelation happened only once? Was the creation of the New Testament the result of a "conscious" process of its authors?²³ We cannot cover here all the answers to these questions, but it is important to notice Harnack's approach to the problem: the fact that he engaged *critically* with the biblical sources does not automatically mean that he rejected their validity. I will highlight this point by stressing the ambivalent attitude that Harnack took in his analysis of the New Testament. Moreover, as I hope to show, these questions are philosophical in nature, as they all lead Harnack's reader to the fundamental questions that guided his analysis: would our understanding of Christian doctrine be different if literature other than the canonical was recognized as authoritative? If our understanding of Christianity depends that much on the documents that have been contingently transmitted as authoritative, what can we rightly affirm about Christianity? In this section, I start with an analysis of the importance Harnack gave to authority in the formation of the Canon. I will then show that Harnack acknowledged, but at the same time critically discussed, the New Testament as a valid source of knowledge and an authoritative document on Christianity.

In his analysis of the "earliest motive force" for the creation of the New Testament, Harnack emphasized "the supreme reverence in which the words and teaching of Christ Jesus were held."²⁴ With the expression "supreme reverence," Harnack highlighted that Jesus was considered more authoritative and inspired than any other prophet. Harnack noticed that the situation after Jesus's death became more problematic, as it was difficult to find a criterion to understand who had the authority.²⁵ Harnack listed three points that would help to answer the question of authority after Jesus. First, he noticed that in "primitive" Christian communities every Christian was believed to have received the Spirit, but some members were distinguished because they were "bearers of the Spirit" (κατ' ἐξοχήν).²⁶ From this point, Harnack noticed that the titles of "Apostle," "Prophet," and "Teachers" were created by the early Christian

²¹ Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament*, 17.

²² Cf. *Ibid.*

²³ Harnack presented these questions in several points in *ibid.*, 2–3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

thinkers and confer authority. Second, Harnack said that every circle of Christians that met in the name of Jesus Christ felt that “it had the Holy Spirit or, in other words, the power of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. V. 4) as leader and supporter.”²⁷ Harnack noticed that these communities used several formulae, such as “The Holy Spirit and we have decided (Acts XV. 28)” or “What we have said, God has said through us (1 Clem. ad Cor. 59).”²⁸ According to Harnack, the fact that the early communities “felt” guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit developed into the institutionalized “Synods,” which, indeed, claimed to have “absolute power.” The third and last point highlighted by Harnack is that the material that constituted the New Testament became “more sacred” as time passed because “[t]he greater became the distance in time from the Apostolical Age, the more sacred became the series of writings that had Catholic character and Apostolic title, *just because of these properties and the distance*.”²⁹ In this regard, ultimately, they were able to decide what the authoritative documents were. Harnack argued that the revelation of the “event” became a “literary” revelation; the latter became the complement of the former, or even more so, it replaced it.³⁰

Let us now move to Harnack’s critical opinion of the validity of and the impact of the New Testament. Harnack offered a good explanation of this in his statement: “The New Testament has preserved for us the most valuable portion of primitive Christian literature; yet at the same time it delivered the rest of the earliest works to oblivion, and has limited the transmission of later works.”³¹ In the first part of the statement, Harnack openly acknowledged the importance of the creation of the New Testament. He explained this point by noting that the canonical material would probably have been lost had it not been canonized. Harnack doubted that any text included in the New Testament today, from the Pauline Epistles to the Johannine Apocalypse, from the Acts of the Apostles to the Gospels, would have been passed down to us otherwise. He noticed that the material presents complicated passages, which, because of these difficulties, have been used by heretics against the doctrine of the Church.³² However, since these texts were recognized as valuable and trustworthy documents reflecting the “primitive” Christian communities, authors such as Eusebius could later produce works that transmitted a rich knowledge of early Christianity.

However, as we have seen, Harnack added that the creation of the New Testament had the additional negative consequence of excluding some “*early orthodox* works,” which had been produced in other provincial churches, such as the Alexandrian church. Harnack said that “with the creation of the New Testament begins the death struggle of that portion of Early Christian literature that had not found acceptance in the Canon.”³³ Harnack further clarified that he was not thinking of the heretical books excluded by the Church, but of the other documents produced by authors considered “orthodox,” which were nevertheless left out from the Canon. However, he added that some of these were still preserved.³⁴ Therefore, Harnack considered the loss of texts to be an important moment in early Christianity because it limited our

²⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 23. In this quotation and in the others that follow, I left the italics as we find them in the original text.

³⁰ “[...] the book takes its place beside the facts for which it vouches, indeed it transforms all facts into words, into doctrine. It represents the Revelation of God as a literary revelation, and sometimes it seems as if the revelation in facts of history required this literary revelation at least as a complement” Ibid., 122. “Thus the Christian revelation acquired a quite different, or rather a ‘higher’ nature; it became a complex of ideas, because the Revelation is given as a revelation in writing. From this point of view the Christian religion became a religion of a book, namely of the Book of Divine Ideas. Then it necessarily followed that the Revelation in historic fact, including the historic Christ, of which the Book gives the narrative, must fall into the background when compared with the Revelation in writing and must become something symbolic.” Ibid., 123.

³¹ Ibid., 131.

³² Ibid. Harnack said in footnote 1: “How troublesome were such expressions as, ‘The god of this world,’ or the doctrines of Predestination and of the Divine hardening of the heart, or the teaching that the Law multiplied transgressions, etc.!” Harnack’s reflection on heretics’ use of biblical sources, and the consequent need of the “official” church to oppose them by creating the Christian doctrine, recurs in many parts of his literary production, and especially in the section dedicated to Gnosticism in the *History of Dogma*. Cf. Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1, 186–226.

³³ Ibid., 133.

³⁴ Among these early orthodox books, Harnack listed: the first and second Epistles of Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, Hermas, the Didache, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Acts of Paul, and the Diatessaron of Tatian (ibid., 134).

knowledge of early Christianity and delivered an image of the “primitive” communities shaped by the documents that had been selected by the authoritative church.

After having noted these aspects, however, Harnack added that this process of limitation of the production of non-canonical literature was not entirely disadvantageous: the fixing of the canon, according to Harnack, limited the prolific production of “an inferior literature [...] That was greedily read and that threatened to stifle all feeling for historical truth and for simplicity and purity in religion [...] that fabricated stories of martyrs and ascetics, ghastly Apocalypses, inventions concerning the Childhood of Jesus, and the like.”³⁵ Harnack therefore thought that the fixing of the doctrine was very important in putting an end to this literature, which, in his opinion, was mainly “Apocryphal, i.e. it carried on a kind of underground existence, appearing again and again at the surface and exercising ever increasing influence upon cultic and religious life.”³⁶ Harnack concluded that the New Testament prevented the church from falling “completely victim to this literature,” “safeguarded the Church,” and “saved the true portrait of Jesus from complete obliteration” because “there was absolutely no other authority in the Church except the New Testament that could have warded off the throttling hand of the Apocrypha.”³⁷

Harnack considered the consequences of the creation of the New Testament as twofold. On the one hand, it put an end to the creation of “authoritative” books, meaning that there was no more room to accept new canonical texts like those included within the New Testament. Harnack wrote, “The literature of enthusiasm now either ceased or was forced to confine itself within the narrow bounds which now restricted its significance and therefore its influence.”³⁸ This was very positive, according to Harnack, because the first thinkers thought that they could all write by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, consequently generating anxiety among the “conscientious authors” who doubted “whether they were not guilty of presumption in taking up the pen.”³⁹ On the other hand, the creation of the New Testament led to the development of theological literature. This point takes us to our next section.

4 Adolf von Harnack and the interpretation of the Church Fathers

As we have seen, in his treatment of early Christianity Harnack emphasized how the creation of the New Testament put an end to a confusing age in which the writings that claimed to possess authority flourished. The creation of the New Testament established a document that everyone could univocally refer to and take as authoritative. However, Harnack noted that the New Testament, due to several complicated passages, demanded new interpretations and explanations. In this regard, Harnack said “every sacred document must be explained and must be defended against false interpretations.”⁴⁰ With this, Harnack meant that the complexity of several passages of the New Testament led certain thinkers, the Gnostics in particular, to develop their own interpretations, which “deviated” from and challenged the new developing church. Therefore, for Harnack, the creation of the New Testament was a catalyst for the multiplication of literature on Christianity. Harnack stated, “Then came a moment after which the collection of sacred books could only, so to speak, itself create or, rather, extend itself – namely the moment when the conviction arose that every work that was Apostolic and Catholic belonged to an authoritative group.”⁴¹ Harnack’s analysis therefore follows a trajectory that began with the “simple” preaching of Jesus, then developed into the fixing of the New Testament, which in turn led to new literature, among which we find exegeses that may explain the more controversial and difficult passages of the Canon.

³⁵ Ibid., 136.

³⁶ Ibid., 136–7.

³⁷ Ibid., 137.

³⁸ Ibid., 138.

³⁹ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 139.

⁴¹ Ibid., 25.

To give an idea of the extent to which Jesus's message became increasingly complicated, Harnack said, "If the Bible was a cosmos, like the universe, it needed for its interpretation simply every form of Science!"⁴² I cannot say whether Harnack had in mind the famous quote by Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) while writing this, but I think that this comparison is a good way of explaining his view on Scripture and the development of theology as a science.⁴³ The famous scientist claimed that we cannot understand the universe if we do not understand the language that can make it intelligible. Similarly, Harnack claimed that, for the early Christians, it was impossible to understand the Bible without the development of a scientific (*wissenschaftliche*) methodology, which assessed the truth or falsity of its claims. For example, Harnack said that Origen's method implied both a "literal" and "spiritual" investigation of the New Testament, and that he showed a "truly scientific interest in the discovery of the genuine text."⁴⁴ In this sense, Harnack noted that the creation of the New Testament implied the development of a critical and historical treatment of the canonical books. In general, Harnack described this process in terms of the development of the Christian doctrine, which, as he said, developed extraordinarily in the first three centuries of Christian history, preparing the early thinkers to challenge the systems of the Gnostics. Yet again, the problem was authority: who had the authority to establish a certain interpretation of the New Testament? Who had the authority to say something *true* about Christianity? As we have said above, the titles *Apostolic* and *Catholic* gradually became a guarantee that a work had authority, and, according to Harnack, this made it possible for the early thinkers to present themselves as authoritative.

As he did with his investigation on the New Testament, Harnack described the development of patristic literature *vis-à-vis* the constitution of the authoritative Church and the Christian doctrine. In this regard, Harnack emphasized the role of the first theologians and of their theories in the fight against heretics, such as the Gnostics and Marcionites. Harnack observed that the New Testament "did not play the principal role" in this battle, but it nevertheless "formed the court of final appeal in controversies concerning the Rule of Faith, and never submitted to any tradition, however ancient, that might be opposed to it."⁴⁵ Therefore, Harnack emphasized that the New Testament was the material upon which dogma and exegesis developed. Exegesis developed from the demand for clarity required by the passages in the New Testament. Harnack thought that exegesis "was forced to do much that it would never have done except at the bidding of Dogmatics."⁴⁶ In this process, Harnack noted, nobody questioned the authority of the Canon anymore: "The authors themselves scarcely dreamed of making deductions that would affect the dignity of the Book in question. If they did, the Church either took no notice or marked down such scholars as suspect [...] No one any longer thought of a time when there was as yet no New Testament; scarcely anyone recollected that the Church had created it."⁴⁷ Indeed, Harnack thought that from Origen of Alexandria onward the theologians who investigated the origins of specific books of the New Testament did it simply for erudition itself. Their investigations, in his opinion, only had an "antiquarian significance."⁴⁸ With this expression, Harnack meant that the theologians after the third century would not dare to make deductions that would affect the dignity of the books of the New Testament. On the other hand, he noted that the Church silenced any

⁴² Ibid., 139.

⁴³ "Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth." Galilei, *Discoveries and opinions of Galileo*, 237–8.

⁴⁴ Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament*, 144.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ibid., 120. Harnack considered the Rule of Faith to be more ancient than the New Testament, and he believed that it influenced significantly the creation of the New Testament itself. See Ibid., 19 note 1. Cf. Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1, 273–303. The discussion is, of course, very different today. For a recent study on the Rule of Faith see Ayres, "Irenaeus and the 'Rule of Truth,'" 145–64.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁷ Cf. Ibid., 118.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ibid.

attempt to question the validity of such books. The consequence of this situation, according to Harnack, was that nobody any longer remembered the time when the New Testament did not exist.

Harnack's description of the development of exegesis is particularly interesting. Harnack did not dedicate as much space to this as he did, for example, to his reconstruction of the development of dogma. However, he made some comments and reflections that allow the reader to understand his perspective on exegesis. For example, Harnack noted how certain words which were not originally in the Bible, such as "homousios," became central to understanding of the Bible in the debates of the early Christian thinkers.

He then focused on another example, namely the concept of "revelation," which shifted from its original meaning as an "historical fact" to a "divine system of thought and complex of ideas."⁴⁹ In other words, revelation understood as the historical fact was relegated to the background so as to leave space for a symbolic and mythical concept of revelation, expressed in written form and characterized by the Logos theory. That is, the main point was not Jesus in his earthly history anymore, but rather the Logos of the written text, which revealed the eternal truth. Indeed, according to Harnack, with the development of theology, Christology put Jesus aside. Therefore, Harnack emphasized that Christians passed from the "Scriptures and the *Lord*" to the "Scriptures and the *Gospel*," as "the attribute of life had become already strictly limited in favour of the letter; when finally it came to the formula, 'The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament,' then the Revelation in history was practically transformed into a revelation in writing."⁵⁰ In certain cases, the church rejected some speculative theories in favor of a more realistic approach to Christianity; however, Harnack noted that, even in these cases, "it is written" expressed the true authoritative revelation, a revelation that was to be found only in scripture and nowhere else.

The shift from the Scriptures and the Lord to the Scriptures and the Gospel had an impact on Christian identity as well. Harnack stressed that communion with God could be reached with the help of a book, and divine direction could only be received by means of the same.⁵¹ To be Christian now meant to accept Scripture: "The Church regarded the New Testament as her own peculiar possession divinely granted; she named herself the Church of the New Covenant with the same title as the book [...] Church and New Testament formed an exclusive unity, so that none but the Church had a right to the works contained in the Canon."⁵²

To conclude, Harnack stressed that patristic exegetical literature developed because of the need to explain and clarify the several unclear passages of the Canon. Harnack argued that the development of exegesis was a natural process, given by the fixing of the New Testament. However, he also noted that the need for explanation increasingly multiplied and led to the use of terminology that was not part of the Gospel. Moreover, exegetical patristic literature had an impact on the meaning of "revelation," which shifted from the historical reality of Jesus to the doctrinal theories of Christology and the development of theology in general. With this analysis, I hope to have shown that Harnack considered biblical and patristic knowledge as valid and important, but also open to criticism. This last point lets us approach the final part of this article, where I finally consider the observations done so far in the context of Harnack's discussion on the knowledge of God with Karl Barth.

5 Adolf von Harnack and Karl Barth: On the knowledge of God

So far, we have discussed Harnack's interest in the role of the authority of the Church in the creation and development of the New Testament and patristic exegetical literature of the New Testament itself. As we have seen, in the text analyzed above, Harnack pushed the discussion several times to a theoretical level,

⁴⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵² Cf. *Ibid.*, 156.

regarding the validity of the knowledge produced by the early thinkers in terms of our actual knowledge of Christianity. A closer reading of correspondence between Adolf von Harnack and Karl Barth in 1923 shows an even more consistent discussion of epistemology and philosophy. In addition to the fact that Harnack probably did not plan to offer thorough speculation on epistemology, the style of the text, namely correspondence structured as short questions and answers, is not ideal for such a discussion. However, I argue that this collection offers some good insights concerning his ideas on the aforementioned topics. Harnack and Barth took opposing positions, facilitating, as such, our reflection on the reception of biblical and patristic sources in Harnack. If they did indeed agree on the fact that theology is about the word of God, they then struggled throughout their conversation to find agreement on how to construct one's speech about God.⁵³

In their discussion, these two theologians expressed two different models of reality, which affected their positions within the debate on the way human beings know and speak about God. This is already clear from the way Harnack titled his letter: *Fifteen questions to the Despisers of Scientific Theology*. Harnack considered history a science and therefore, scientific theology needed to be historical.⁵⁴ According to Harnack, a theologian had the task of investigating the historical material available on Christianity in order to critically engage with it and reach a conclusion on its validity, and to show *what* Christianity really is. Barth opened his reply to Harnack by clarifying that he did not entirely despise this understanding of theology.⁵⁵ He explained that, from his point of view, historical knowledge could give information on “the communication of the ‘content of the gospel.’” However, he also added that scientific theology “has nothing to do whatever with one’s ‘heuristic knowledge’ (*Erfahrung*) and ‘experience’ (*Erlebnis*) in themselves.”⁵⁶ Barth therefore opposed historical and critical knowledge to “[i]nner openness, heuristic knowledge, experience, heart” and proposed to consider the first as subordinated to faith, as he asked: “Why should ‘historical knowledge and critical reflection’ not be of preparatory service in this?”⁵⁷ Indeed, Barth affirmed that faith is only

⁵³ Rumscheidt reported that Harnack and Barth already met in 1920 at the student conference at Aarau and then at the home of Eberhard Vischer (1865–1946) in Basel. In these meetings, Harnack learned, probably for the first time, his former student's new perspective on theology. As Rumscheidt noted, Barth's work *Der Römerbrief* circulated more widely among German scholars only after the Kaiser Press in München sold the copies in 1920, despite being published in Bern in 1919. By the time of the correspondence in 1923, Harnack was already aware of the distance in matters of theology between him and his former student. Indeed, Barth was first fascinated and influenced by Harnack's liberal theology, during his years at university in Berlin. Cf. Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*, 14–5. See also: Hunsinger, “The Harnack/Barth Correspondence;” and Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology*, 14–20.

⁵⁴ Rumscheidt stressed that Harnack was concerned with the direction that theology was taking in the academic context. From Harnack's perspective, Barth's approach threatened all the efforts of the previous decades to give theology the status of science. This process already started in the time of the Reformation, continued during the *Aufklärung*, and received an important impulse with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) in the nineteenth century. In the context of the foundation of the Humboldt University of Berlin in 1810, Schleiermacher was a strong proponent of theology as a science. On this topic, see: Zachhuber, *Theology as Science*, 2–20; and Stroup, “The Idea of Theological Education at the University of Berlin.” For a study on Protestant theological faculties in Germany see Wischmeyer, *Theologiae Facultas*.

⁵⁵ “Someone objecting to that form of Protestant theology, which has become determinative since Pietism and the Enlightenment, especially during the last 50 years of German history, is not necessarily a ‘despiser of scientific theology.’ The point of the objection is that this particular theology might have moved further away from its them than is good.” Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*, 31. Rumscheidt noted that Barth did not reject the historical–critical method of biblical and historical research. Rather, he proposed to give to it a different place in the understanding of the gospel, such as a “preparatory service.” Cf. *Ibid.*, 122–3. On Barth's evaluation of the historical–critical method, Paul E. Capetz observed: “The truth is that Barth sought to transcend the opposition between conservative and liberal theologies by completely redefining the terms of the debate [...] The problem for Barth was that the Bible had become of interest to scholars chiefly as a source for reconstructing the history of ancient religion.” Capetz, “The Old Testament as a Witness to Jesus Christ,” 477–8. For a reference to Barth's opinion on the historical Jesus, Joseph C. Weber noted: “If one asks Barth what significance the historical Jesus has for Christian faith, the answer will be: the so-called historical Jesus is a construction of historicism, which misses the fullness and reality of his life and death by limiting it to that realm of history that can be reconstructed by the historical–critical method (*Historie*).” Weber, “Karl Barth and the Historical Jesus,” 350.

⁵⁶ Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*, 32.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

awakened by a practical activity such as preaching and, because of this, “[t]he task of theology is at one with the task of preaching.”⁵⁸ This meant that in his opinion theology is inspired by the word of God and directed to the subjectivity of human beings. Barth, therefore, moved away from Harnack’s understanding of theology as a science because he considered theology to be entirely about personal faith.⁵⁹ Harnack disagreed with Barth’s point since, as he repeated, “the task of theology is at one with the task of science in general”⁶⁰ and “we cannot transform the theological professorship into a pulpit-ministry.”⁶¹ Harnack was hostile to the idea that theology could be reduced to subjective experience, as it would undermine knowledge and critical rejection, which leads to an understanding of Christianity: “[d]o we not need, for an understanding of the Bible, next to an inner openness, historical knowledge and critical reflection? [...] [a]nd how can there be such preaching without historical knowledge and critical reflection?”⁶² In Harnack’s opinion, the lack of historical knowledge and critical reflection would make it impossible to avoid fanaticism – a point on which Barth actually agreed in his first answer. Barth said that, in principle, nobody can really tell if a person is feeling “genuine faith” or “fanaticism.”⁶³ Harnack claimed that, in order to avoid fanaticism and reach a more “proper” and “faithful” understanding of God, it is necessary to join together preaching, revelation, life, and historical criticism.

In addition to their discussion of the nature of theology as a discipline and its task, Barth and Harnack debated their understandings of God. Harnack believed that God revealed himself through the historical process, therefore, making himself understandable to human beings. As such, human beings can access and understand the word of God, but they need a constant historical–critical reworking in order to ensure that the “right” word is understood. The fact that God is “understandable” to human beings provides material for the solid constitution of morality and education. Harnack centered Christian religion on *action* and responsibility, as Jesus did not ask his disciples to renounce their lives and “escape” from reality in ascetic practices.⁶⁴ Barth, on the contrary, claimed that God was “outside” human experience, which means that we cannot even properly talk about it in terms of “experience.” Because God is totally “other,” Barth said that faith “will never be able to avoid completely the necessity of a more or less radical protest against this world.”⁶⁵ Historical criticism, said Barth, can never sufficiently analyze the testimony of God.⁶⁶ Harnack contended that Barth’s approach to God as “otherness” would undermine any possibility of saying something solid and concrete on morality and education,⁶⁷ and human beings would therefore have easier access to atheism.

This discussion of the understandability of God leads to Harnack and Barth’s assessment on the validity of human knowledge in theology. Because Harnack thought that God *must be* in human experience, and that it should be possible for human beings to understand and serve Him, the sources on Jesus have a very important epistemological role to play. Harnack, therefore, considered historical sources on Jesus and the historical–critical method to serve the purpose of reconstructing Jesus’s personality and teachings, and

58 Ibid.

59 Concerning Harnack’s hostility toward the “subjectivist” experience of faith, see in general his text: Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums*; translated in English: Harnack, *What is Christianity?* In this famous cycle of lessons, Harnack held in opposition the ascetic/monastic tradition and the Christian ethical community, e.g., “Nevertheless, there is a sphere of ethical thought which is peculiarly expressive of Jesus’ Gospel” Harnack, *What is Christianity?* 77 “Jesus defined the sphere of the ethical in a way in which no one before him had ever defined it.” Ibid., 80.

60 Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*, 36.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 29.

63 Cf. Ibid.

64 Harnack treated the topic of asceticism and Christianity in particular in Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, 85–95.

65 Cf. Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*, 32. Barth said, “The so-called ‘experience of God’ (*Gotteserlebnis*) is therefore as different as heaven and earth from the faith awakened by God [...] Faith does come about practically through preaching, but preaching comes about through ‘the Word of the Christ’ (no matter in what state the preacher’s historical knowledge and critical reflection are).” Ibid.

66 Ibid., 44.

67 Ibid., 29–30.

only scientific theology to be able to “undertake this study.”⁶⁸ Far from simply being a “subjective experience,” God is, for Harnack, revealed in the human world and, therefore, is also part of this culture. Harnack said that if he were to follow Barth’s approach, he would conclude that anything that has been said over the centuries – in this case he mentioned Goethe or Kant – would not be a valid expression of the knowledge of God.⁶⁹ On the contrary, Barth’s position toward the human capacity of producing literature on God, given that God was for him, “outside experience,” embraced skepticism concerning human knowledge. He warned Harnack about the danger of considering himself to be “on a pinnacle of culture and religion”⁷⁰ and added “[i]f the knowledge that “God is love” is the *highest* and *final knowledge about God*, how can one consistently pretend to be in possession of it?”⁷¹ Barth thought that the sole faith awakened by God leads to the encounter with Jesus Christ.⁷²

Finally, this conversation also touched on another aspect, which is of particular interest in this special issue, namely the reception of biblical and patristic sources. In one of his answers, Barth mentioned the topic of non-canonical texts and suggested the slight possibility that there might be other literature speaking truth about God. He affirmed, “Should an extra-canonical writing contain in a notable fashion this very testimony, there can be no *a priori* impossibility of letting this testimony speak through it also, no, quite to the contrary.”⁷³ However, overall, Barth remained of the opinion that the Canon expresses revelation, a unique and mysterious revelation, which is grasped not in virtue of its content but because of human being’s faith in it. In other words, Barth admitted that we cannot exclude *a priori* the possibility that some other texts communicated truth about God, but in the end, the only thing that matters is that the only certain source is Scripture, and this is enough to awaken faith in God. This is the primary tool for accessing faith through knowledge of Christ, which can never become an object of human cognition.⁷⁴ Again, Barth emphasized that the act of revelation “can only be *witnessed* and *believed* because it is revealed. It is never a historical–psychological reality which becomes directly cognizable for example in our religious experience [...] in the thoughts of Goethe and Kant about God or in whatever towers of human god-likeness you may mention.”⁷⁵

In the last letter of this collection, the discussion moved to the final question of how to consider the literary production of the Christian authors in general. Harnack gives us an insight into his thought concerning “all those who express their Christianity as prophets or witnesses like preachers, whether they do it in biblical commentaries or in dogmatic writings etc.”⁷⁶ On this point, Harnack says that he did not consider these authors as *subjects*, in opposition to Barth, but as *objects* of scientific theology. This language, after this study, now appears clearer. To understand Paul, the Church Fathers, Luther, and all the other theologians as subjects means to focus on their first-person experience of God. On the contrary, to consider them objects of scientific theology means to consider them objects of investigation. Harnack concedes to Barth that one could be inspired by the study of scientific theology, but then adds: “there is only *one* scientific method, there is also only *one* scientific task: the pure cognition of its object.”⁷⁷ All the literature that has been produced on God is therefore an object of human understanding; with the help of the historical–critical method, we can discern what is valid and what is to be discarded.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁷¹ Ibid., 34.

⁷² Ibid., 35.

⁷³ Ibid., 44.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 49.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 53. “A scientific-theological presentation *can* also inspire and edify, thanks to its object, but the scientific theologian whose aim it is to inspire and to edify brings a foreign flame to his altar.”

6 Conclusion

In this study, I hope to have stressed some key aspects of Harnack's work that can lead to a proper understanding of his evaluation of biblical and patristic sources, together with a suggestion of what reception meant for him.

Despite his attempt to reduce Christianity to a core of some practical teachings preached by Jesus during his lifetime, Harnack considered the collection of the New Testament to be greatly important and unique for three reasons. First, it ensured the transmission of the memory of Jesus's teachings, which would have been lost if simply left to the memory of the first Christians. Second, it was unique because, as Harnack said, it took place in temporal proximity to Jesus. Of course, the texts from the New Testament are not contemporary to Jesus, but from the perspective of a nineteenth-century scholar, these texts are among the closest documents that describe Jesus's life and teachings. This is also the reason why Harnack thought that the period up until the third century offered privileged material for theological study. Finally, as I have demonstrated, Harnack considered the increasing authority and sacrality of the church and the affirmation of these texts to be necessary, as Christianity needed a solid foundation, a criterion with which to divide truth from falsehood, a tool with which to fight its enemies and prevent them from spreading new doctrines, which challenged the authority of the new Church.

With the analysis of the correspondence with Barth, I have established a connection between the particular case of the biblical and patristic sources and Harnack's broader discussion on human knowledge. As I highlighted above, Harnack maintained that God has made himself understandable to human beings, who therefore have the possibility of building an understanding of God as long as they remain in the limits of their experience, in Kantian terms. Because of this, Harnack thought that every age and author produced its own understanding of God, and that these theological theories all say something about Him. Therefore, according to Harnack, the theories produced by theologians and philosophers over time came, to a greater or lesser degree, closer to its truth – and it is the theologian who has the task of studying, documenting, and comparing these theories in order to provide an evaluation of them. In this regard, we have seen that Harnack believed that the development of history as a science and theology as a historical discipline enabled one to reach a conclusion on the validity of the theories produced concerning Christianity. In turn, these observations mean that all biblical and patristic sources are, to Harnack, valuable products of the intellectual progress of human beings. At the same time, Harnack emphasized that they were the product of a certain age and that they received their credibility from the authoritative institution of their time. For this reason, Harnack thought that biblical and patristic sources should be discussed and interpreted in their historical context.

Harnack's entire discussion on this topic looks solid and coherent, but in reality, it constitutes a complex and contradictory dilemma. On the one hand, there is the acknowledgement of the human capacity to produce, within their historical and finite condition, narratives of Christianity that are valuable and trustworthy. On the other hand, there is an awareness of the limits of human knowledge and of the authoritative structures, which are closely connected to the development of theories and doctrines, to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish where the "husk" ends and the "core" begins. With this article, I hope to have provided insight into Harnack's treatment of biblical and patristic sources by showing the extent to which his beliefs are based on complex philosophical reflection, which has not always received the attention it deserves.

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