

Religious Movements of To-day

I

The Revival of Calvinism and Some of its Sponsors

BY THE REV. DAVID CAIRNS, B.A., BRIDGE OF ALLAN

IT was in the years following the war that the ultimate futility of all purely human activity became evident, and the idea of easy progress and automatic evolution towards better things became discredited. In these years the "Theology of Crisis" was born. It was seen with a new clarity that if there was to be salvation, it could not come from human leadership or effort, it must come to man as a gift across that gulf which man cannot traverse. The Theology of Crisis maintains that the Word of God first of all exposes the contradiction of human existence, and then, in grace, covers it. But though this name truly describes the Theology, it is not the name which Barth or Brunner gave to it. Barth has called the great work on which he is engaged, "Church Dogmatic"; while Brunner would prefer to speak of "Theology of the Bible." However, it is not an unusual thing for theologians to claim that their system is Biblical! The Theology of Crisis claims to take the fact of Revelation in dead earnest; its chief principle might be said to be the great tenet of the Reformers, "Salvation by grace alone."

Back to the Reformers

This theology is, in fact, a movement in the direction of the theology of the Reformers. Continually in the works of Barth and Brunner one finds "Biblical and Reformed Faith" cited as being opposed to some tendency in modern theology. It is true that the sponsors of this theology do not believe in the literal inspiration of Luther and Calvin, for they admit that there are many things in the thought of the Reformers which belonged to their own day rather than to eternity. But it is the principle of the Reformation which Barth and Brunner assert must stand unassailed to-day, the belief that the sole standard and norm for Faith is the Word of God, and the works of Calvin and Luther are the grand example of a Theology governed by this standard.

And thus, next to the Bible, there is no

authority whom Barth or Brunner would so gladly have on their side as Calvin. Hence the malicious observer might take delight in the spectacle of these two thinkers, in their recent sharp discussion and difference, each citing strings of proof-texts from Calvin's Institutes and Commentaries, to demonstrate the truth of his position. The likeness to a duel might even be further pressed, for each protagonist has behind him a second, and each of these seconds wields a volume written by himself, proving respectively that Calvin did and did not believe in Natural Theology and General Revelation. For this is the issue on which Barth and Brunner have separated, it is to be feared, finally.

But the Theology of Crisis is a genuine and living movement, not a regression. It might be described as the massive Faith of the Reformers, living in the contemporary world. It has not turned its back on the problems posed to the believer to-day by Science and History; it is the faith that Calvin would have had, had he been alive to-day. And it does not hold that belief in Reprobation which makes Calvin in passages so unchristian. This theology has had, especially in the hands of Barth, a tremendous disruptive influence on the other theologies which until recently held the field; and there is no sign that its influence is on the wane. All evidence, indeed, is to the contrary.

Away from Modernism

The Theology of Crisis is a movement away from Modernism. Modernist theologians, while frequently believing in Christ as the Lord, have not found adequate expression for their faith. They have said that Jesus is Lord, or has the value of God, because He was the great teacher, or the first perfect embodiment of the religious feeling of absolute dependence on God, or the first man to be absolutely true to the idea of the Kingdom of God. But such theories make Him the embodiment or discovery of some human idea or perfection.

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And men might have reached this without Him, and may yet go beyond Him. The Theology of Crisis is not that Jesus is essentially Leader (though He is that, too), but that He is essentially Lord. He does not go ahead of the human army, but comes bearing to it the spoils that it could never have won by its own efforts; He comes to us across the gulf which separates us from God. He tells us what we have no right to say to ourselves, that God loves us; indeed, His very coming to us is God's message, in which God gives Himself to us. Therefore Jesus is the unique and absolute Revelation of God. He is God with us, Immanuel.

Evangelical Passion

To many men both of the Fundamentalist and of the Modernist School, the Theology of Crisis came as a deliverance, and to-day thinkers like Bultmann will be found among the Dialectical Theologians, men who combine radical critical tendencies with a very robust evangelical faith. You will also find among this group men who have been saved from the sinking ship of Fundamentalism, and others who were once modernist, like Barth and Brunner themselves. It is with the passion of converts that Barth and Brunner and Thurneysen speak. Brunner has been heard to say in criticism of the religious language used by some Modernists—"I too used to believe that Jesus was merely a leader and example, but then I was honest enough not to use language which can only be fairly used by those who believe that He is the Son of God."

There can be no doubt that behind this new theology there lies a religious discovery, or rather a rediscovery of the sovereignty of God, that chief tenet of Calvinism. But the religious movement in its earlier stages has been mostly confined to students and ministers. Many country congregations have been surprised by such sermons as one which was preached by a young pastor of this School, beginning—"I have never loved God, and never shall love Him." The concepts forged in the hands of the leaders in the white heat of religious conviction are sometimes too facile in the hands of young students who play with them gaily as with counters.

The Influence of the Movement

Outside the Evangelical Church the influence of the Movement has been considerable, and is growing. Not only is it the

first Protestant Theology for generations which Rome has taken seriously, but, largely owing to Barth's splendid courage, that doctrine of the Sovereignty of God which proved so valuable a weapon in the defence of Geneva against Rome, is to-day strong in the hands of those who bravely oppose the totalitarian claims of the Nazi State and the Religion of Race. Barth's polemical works are widely read, even in non-Christian circles, but his larger books are not reaching the wider public which was touched by the *Commentary to the Romans*, first published in 1918. It was then, to use his own picture, that, like a man in the night climbing a church tower, and feeling for the stair handrail, he pulled by mistake the bell-rope, and startled the darkened countryside. The bigger theological works of Karl Heim of Tübingen have to-day a larger reading public than is reached by any of the theologians of Crisis. So, at least, Brunner maintains.

The Protagonists of the Movement

A few personal details may not be out of place. Barth, Brunner, and Thurneysen were three young pastors in adjacent parishes in Switzerland. It is probable that if any of the three friends was at the first the leader, it was Thurneysen, a man of fine and sensitive nature, and a notable preacher.

Later, Barth's prophetic and emphatic nature and Brunner's clear and passionate reason brought them into greater prominence. They are all still under fifty years of age. Barth is a man of charming diffidence in personal matters, as the saying quoted attests. But where he believes that an issue of importance is at stake, he can be extremely rude, with a boisterous Swiss humour. He pictures himself calling on an angel, to blow with a silver trumpet of gigantic proportions into Brunner's ear the truth that the "new nature" spoken of by Paul is not just the "old nature" repaired, like a broken-down car which has been set on the road again.

Brunner, too, can be very uncompromising where he believes that important issues are at stake, and those to whom agreement and quiet are the main things in life may perhaps suggest that there is in both an element of fanaticism. Brunner is short and stocky in build, with dark upstanding hair. He is clean-shaven, with strong chin and fine brow. His eyes and whole expression and gestures express great intellectual activity and an impulsive temperament. One has

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the impression that the whole force of a very passionate nature is applied to the working of an intellect sharpened to the keenness of a razor. But here there is no love of distinctions for distinctions' sake, no futile play with concepts, which is the mark of some English philosophy. This mind will always be found dealing with big questions, and cutting away the undergrowth which obscures essential issues. It is a mind which has, as Barth has said, an "uncanny clarity." He seems to combine something of French lucidity with German thoroughness.

About one hundred students attend Brunner's classes—a much smaller number than Heim has in Tübingen, or Barth had in Bonn. But the reason for this lies largely in the high cost of living in Switzerland, especially for German students, who form the majority of foreigners studying in Zürich.

At regular intervals Brunner invites students to "Open evenings" in his house, where, in a crowded and friendly atmosphere of tea and tobacco, problems of Theology, Philosophy, and Politics are raised and discussed. Many foreign students carry away happy memories of Professor and Mrs. Brunner and their little boys.

Brunner and the Group Movement

During the last five years Brunner has been closely in touch with the Group Movement. He has himself written of his first reactions of criticism and dislike for the movement—a band of Theological Gipsies, as he styled them to himself. Later he decided that the movement had a very great deal to teach the Church, and supports it heartily now. He has himself said that his contact with it led him to make a second discovery in the religious sphere, as important as that first discovery when with Barth and Thurneysen he became for the first time aware of the real significance of the Word of God. In working with the groups he co-operates with his intimate friend, Professor Spoerri, professor of Romance Languages in the University of Zürich, and Dr. Maeder, a well-known psycho-therapist in the same city. Barth is opposed to the movement: Thurneysen is said to be friendly. Is it to the Groups

that Brunner owes the fact that he is a politer controversialist than Barth?

The Issue between Barth and Brunner

What is the issue on which Barth and Brunner have separated? Very briefly, it is the issue of Natural Theology. Is there any knowledge of God outside the Christian Revelation to which the Old and New Testaments bear witness? Brunner says "Yes"—Barth says "No." Indeed, this is the title of his pamphlet against Brunner! It is impossible to do justice to the issues raised in such short compass as this. Brunner maintains that in a sense the image of God is not wholly effaced in man by sin; Barth holds the opposite. Barth's main thesis is that if the natural man has any knowledge of God, then the salvation of man, when it happens, is not wholly performed by grace, and hence the main tenet of the Reformers is violated. Brunner says that God speaks to man, and not to stocks and stones, and that this capacity for the Word in man is the Divine Image, injured, but not effaced. This Image, however, is the gift of God to man in Creation, and not at all a work or merit of man. Therefore the Reformed principle is not infringed. In this argument, Brunner seems to have the better of it.

The anxiety of Barth is that if he admits a second source of Revelation in Nature, as well as the first source in Christ, then the door will be opened to all the Nazist heathen doctrines, in which it is claimed that God is revealed in Blood and the German Race. Here is danger of heathenism or compromise with a new form of idolatry. Here also the issue is most urgent; but is there not again a confusion of thought? Is there not an ambiguity in the words "a second source of Revelation"? To take a very rough parallel, is the authority of University education undermined by admitting that the information given in the lowest form of the kindergarten school is not wholly false?

It might be better to leave alone these disputants and their seconds to discover what Calvin thought on this matter. Probably he was not very clear himself! But surely the Bible sides with Brunner rather than with Barth!