

Protestant Insights Today

by CHARLES STINSON

IN HIS recent study *Protestant Thought from Rousseau to Ritschl*, Karl Barth commented, "Perhaps the placing of philosophy and theology beside each other is a matter which after all cannot be spoken of without irony—and from the theological side, too!" This is Barth's thought as he takes a moment out from his considerations of Kant to brood over the meaning of the world of Protestant thought to which he has given his life, that "theological side, too!"

Now we in the Church have not, of course, given our lives to that world. Nevertheless, we must all finally end by starting to think about it almost as seriously as its own inhabitants do.

The eminent Jesuit Father Gustave Weigel has made this quite clear in his *Survey of Protestant Theology in Our Day* and again in his remarkable—indeed, for this country, almost epoch-making—article "Protestant Theology as a Catholic Concern."

With Father Weigel, and *Humani Generis*, we "take it for granted" that cultivated Catholics must know a great deal about the thought of other Christian intellectuals—especially the work of the brilliant Barth, of Tillich, Nygren, Brunner, the Niebuhrs, Aulén, Cullmann, Bultmann, the Baillies, Bennett and all the other recent and contemporary writers on what has been called the New Protestantism.

There are, however, certain prerequisites to such an effort. In order to *understand* (as opposed to simply knowing about) contemporary Protestant theology, we must frankly face its achievements and candidly recognize them as such. We cannot do this unless we contrive to view Protestant achievements through Protestant eyes while constantly seeing our Protestant view through Catholic eyes. We must, in short, don a pair of ecumenical bi-focals. If we do not, Protestant theology today will merely distort and seem like an enormous, an architectonic, proliferation of ever more ingenious errors. And we shall have, of course, already quit theology to return—once again—to the barren soil of worn-out polemics.

Secondly, we must remember that creative Protestant thought has, in the strict sense, no past. It has, rather, a series of yesterdays and it can be held to account for none of them. It is, as Father Weigel says,

Mr. Stinson, an interested observer of the current religious scene, with this article makes his first appearance in *The Commonweal*.

both cleanly disjunctive and "fluid." Save for the remnant of intellectual fundamentalism, creative Protestant thought, whether Liberal, Neo-orthodox or "apocalyptic," is always a vital monument to a moment.

Thirdly, we must, whatever else we may do, *not* follow Bossuet and assume that Protestant thought sets itself the same goals as does thought within the Church. From this false premise, we move on only too smoothly to the satisfying conclusion that this fluid, this momentary quality of Protestant thought is a weakness in, or at least an embarrassment to, the Protestant mind. And, of course, we could not be in greater error. The truly Protestant mind regards the eternal fluidity of its thought as simply a vital openness to the ceaseless process of becoming which is life itself. In his intriguing *The Protestant Era*, Tillich draws a profound distinction between the historically conditioned evangelical element in Protestantism (a hyper-Augustinianism) and the true Protestant principle which is, of course, private judgment.

If we keep these considerations in mind, we will, I think, be making a fairly successful approach to that vantage point from which Protestant thinkers view their own achievements.

THIS PROTESTANT moment, Neo-orthodoxy, is, in a very real sense, then, the only Protestant moment we can discuss. The liberal past can be viewed only negatively from the present, and the next creative moment remains as unknown as the future secular *Weltanschauung* which will form it.

Thanks to the untiring efforts of the Luce organization, everyone literate enough to scan *Time's* sprightly little religion section has become at least vaguely familiar with the outlines of the history of the "new somber theology of spiritual crisis which takes sin seriously." Its rise, along with existentialism, from Barth's Rhineland rectory to Harvard is known to us all. It is one of the great success stories of our time. In comparison, the general acceptance given the Neo-Thomist revival seems rather cool.

Catholic critical interest in the movement began quite early in Europe. The celebrated Neo-Augustinian Jesuit Erich Przywara began it with his warmly eirenic review of *Römerbrief*—a review which amused Barth as much as it surprised and delighted him. ("Those,

like ourselves, who are moving in the world of the theology of the Reformation, for this very reason, ought not—and indeed do not—cast in the teeth of others that they are moving with conviction in the world of medieval theology.”)

That same Catholic interest in Barth and in the other Neo-orthodox writers runs like a constant thread all through the twenties and thirties, in *Hochland*, in *Etudes*, in *Stimmen Der Zeit*, in *Vie Intellectuelle*, in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* and in many other learned periodicals.

The noted Swiss theologian Father Hans Urs von Balthasar has an excellent book on him, and a younger Swiss writer, Hans Kung, has suggested that Barth shares his theory of Justification with the Council of Trent. Whatever we might wonder about that marvel, we must note that Kung's work has managed to receive both Barth's interested approbation and a very friendly review in *Razón y Fé* by the Spanish Jesuit Juan Alfaro.

In the United States, Father Weigel has published his *Survey* and indicated a particular admiration for Tillich whose lucid, highly abstracted philosophical theology he calls “a real, organic Protestantism . . . total and intelligible.” Father Weigel's work must be seen, of course, against the backdrop of Karl Adam's *Una Sancta*, Louis Bouyer's *Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, John A. Hardon's *Christianity in Conflict*, Van Der Pol's *The Christian Dilemma*, George Tavad's *Catholic Approaches to Protestantism* and other constructive works.

Beyond the obvious pragmatic justification for this interest—the needs of a dawning eirenic era—there are several deep, purely speculative elements in Neo-orthodox thought itself which make it a peculiarly rewarding Protestant moment to study, even were there no ecumenical movement to prompt us.

WHILE IT is impossible to detail here such a complex thought system, we may say, without distorting too much, that Neo-orthodoxy takes the sophisticated anti-rationalist philosophy of existence preceding essence and merges it with a profound grasp of the psychological myths aspect of Biblical religion, in order to produce varying mixtures of what Sidney Hook once called “reason and myth.” The Neo-orthodox thinkers are thus able to accept both the unbelief of our age and the belief of the Christian community by metamorphosing them and then transcending them.

A “right wing,” Barth, and the much more conservative Nygren and Aulén, show a predominance of the specifically Biblical elements over the philosophical; the “middle,” Brunner, Niebuhr and the majority of the younger Americans, more or less balance them; on the “left,” the philosophical considerably surpasses the Biblical in Tillich and, even further “left,” in

Bultmann, who takes the existential kernel of the New Testament out of the mythological husk of the first century in order to re-encase it in the mythology of the twentieth.

There are a number of fundamental insights in Neo-orthodox thought which help explain its admirable fertility. Foremost, perhaps, is its clear recognition of the essential ambiguity of all temporal religious existence both in itself and vis-à-vis the types of “infidelity” around it—and within it. This note is particularly strong in Reinhold Niebuhr who reveals in all his writings a most sensitive feeling for the universal, indestructible penetration of the City of God by the city of man, of piety by wordliness, of good by evil.

A second insight offered by these writers is their understanding and use of what they usually call the “super-historical.” This derives from a grasp of the supra-temporal, psychological aspect of a given historical truth-event. Even the most Incarnational theology recognizes, in reflection, this aspect of the event, but only Neo-orthodoxy emphasizes and even exalts it. For the genuinely “modern” mind, the Cross may range anywhere from an isolated and even dubiously alleged happening to a fine subject for the Renaissance painters. But as a historic-redemptive kerygma we must realize that it is, for certain profound cultural reasons, nearly an impossibility for such minds. We must further admit that much of its *essential theological* content has been brought across to them by Neo-orthodox writers in psychological and symbolic terms. If the New Testament is closed to them as history, it may still be open as Wisdom.

Finally, the Neo-orthodox writers have, to an admirably keen degree, a sense for the inexpressible poignance of this world, “the casual, ugly attrition of time,” as a profound novelist of our time has put it. Without this sense, all theology and all spiritual literature remains sterile—a compendium of correct syllogisms and appropriate footnotes, all at an awe-inspiring remove from its mysterious subject—theandric life.

These and other valuable insights—the paradoxical use of the *via negativa* and a shrewd social critique—are found, in varying degrees, in all the “senior” writers previously mentioned. In this country, among the rising group of Protestant intellectuals influenced by them are such as Alexander Miller, Nels Ferré, John Dillenberger, Joseph Haroutunian, Daniel Williams, the lively Lutherans Martin Marty and Jaroslav Pelikan. Dr. Pelikan's astonishing new book, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*, is an excellent view of Catholicism as it is seen by an informed, intelligent non-Catholic theologian.

We would, in sum, do well to try and capture some of these creative insights in our own thinking within the Church. “Not who says it,” observes the prince of Scholastics, “but what is said.”

THERE ARE, of course, from the Catholic viewpoint certain major intrinsic faults in Neo-orthodox thought—subjectivism, voluntarism, and a bias against historicity. These are all so well known that we can be excused from rehearsing them here. We might only add that, like all Protestant thought, Neo-orthodoxy is subject to a powerful and relentless law of oscillation: its periodic extreme brilliance is achieved only by dramatic—and risky—exaggeration of its theses. Either the age “horizontalizes” and absorbs theology as with Ritschl, Schleiermacher and Harnack. Or, as with Kierkegaard, Barth and (to a lesser extent) Tillich, theology locates deftly and exploits ferally the typical foibles of the age in order to stress, to an admittedly striking but finally insupportable tension, the distinction between nature and grace, the world and “the utterly other.”

Finally, some of its writers have not avoided that blunder that so many of us within the Church have committed. A sort of—shall we say?—confidence game with the world. We found secular humanist culture in a confused and discouraged moment and we could not resist the temptation to be rather pleased. Tillich assures us that the existential divine is “protected” by his involvement in “man’s estrangement” from the “arrogance of having revelatory answers at his disposal.” Unfortunately, the otherwise perceptive Reinhold Niebuhr has not been protected from talking at times to secularists in terms such as these: “We can only know that the twentieth century has refuted the dreams of the earlier centuries of the modern era in the most tragic terms, and that modern culture is immersed in pathetic confusions by reason of this refutation.”

We can have an inkling of how disastrous this confidence really is only when we realize that, despite wars and rumors of wars, nothing has actually changed between Christians and the “world.” It remains obvious to critical and unbelieving eyes that, as Henri de Lubac puts it, prudently enough, “in spite of every possible effort of adaptation, the action of the Church remains far from effective. Far from making a perpetual advance, she goes back. Even where she is in apparent control and her influence is recognized and encouraged, she does not bring about the reign of the Gospel and the social order is not transformed according to her principles.”

A supernal confidence, then, among the “pathetic confusions” of our secular fellow citizens is not only a lapse in charity; it is a theology of delusion. When Neo-orthodoxy was made, some months ago, the subject of a startlingly vehement and widely discussed attack by a young Protestant intellectual writing in a prominent secular journal, significantly one of the points he scored the hardest was just this confidence. It should be a lesson both to the Neo-orthodox and for those of us in the Church.

Since, however, its faults and critics notwithstanding, the Neo-orthodox moment in the Protestant mind shows every sign of continuing for some time yet in full vitality, we might be wise to do some thinking about it vis-à-vis the Church herself.

The pastoral question is simple. On sacramental levels, the life of the Church continues, deep, divinely vivified from age to age and profoundly unaffected by the speculations of any innovator, no matter how brilliant. The apostolic question is somewhat more complicated since evangelization depends, in part, for its means and vocabulary upon the milieu in which it works. The cultural question is, naturally, the most complex of all. On the level of speculative theology, the Church’s life is continually—if slowly and rather irregularly—being affected by the philosophical, theological and scientific thoughts and moods around her. Here is where exploration is possible and necessary. What is the real meaning for the Church of Neo-orthodoxy and of this entire swift, spiritually contradictory age which has formed it?

Perhaps Tillich himself has already supplied one of the major keys for this exploration. It would not be, one supposes, out of the usual order of things. In a memorable passage he has conceived of the Protestant thing as a spirit, ever restless, ever ready to sacrifice unity, tranquillity and substance in order to push on ahead to discover new and unknown realms at the “boundary situations” of human existence. In a retrospective glance, he assigns the attempt to “preserve” the “substance” of Christianity to the Church.

In doing so, he has, I think, at last *exactly* stated the final—and perhaps complimentary—distinction between the Church which must keep this earthen vessel and all the Protestant moments which must try tirelessly to bear the Truth without it.

EASTER IN NOMINE

The Maundy Thursday shoppers,
Laving their feet in March’s freshlets,
Complacently await
Eggrolling at Gethsemane.
Brains abud with bunny ears,
(Longer far than Simon Peter lopped),
And eyes channeled in a pink exhaustion
They stand atwaddle, apt for the word
To hippity-hop to Calvary.
Their ashen bodies,
Aneomoned in sack cerements,
Shall Hosannah the Resurrection morn
With such Handeled yawps of joy
That Salisbury’s stained equinox
Shall seem a nimbler belief.

JOHN J. McALEER.