

Barthianism as a Corrective

THE NEW DEVELOPMENT IN THEOLOGY HAS MADE US AWARE OF OUR PRE-SUPPOSITIONS AND FORCED US TO SEE HOW UNSUSPECTINGLY WE HAVE BEEN CAUGHT BY PASSING INTELLECTUAL FASHIONS

John Baillie

I THINK that as far back as ten or twelve years ago there were a good many of us who were sometimes visited by an uneasy feeling that the tradition of liberal religious thought in which we stood was in danger of leading us towards a dead end. Greatly emancipating as it had certainly been, we were beginning to wonder whether along that particular line there was much further that one could go—whether all there was to be said had not already been said. The theological situation had become a little flat and stale, and it could not be claimed that our discussions were any longer of the first order of interest. Had we then really come to the end of theological history? Was Christian thought to remain forever satisfied with this latest simplification of the Christian faith? It seemed unlikely. Yet, if there was no way of going forward, neither did it seem possible to go back; for the road we had chosen seemed so *obviously* the right one that there could really be no question of our looking for another.

HISTORIANS could indeed have informed us that this was by no means the first time that such a situation had arisen in Christian thought, but that on the contrary the history of dogma was full of similar examples. One very striking parallel might have been found in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. That century had been the Age of Reason. The rationalism which it professed now appears to us the most jejune and barren of all human outlooks. There is hardly any other Christian literature that is to us so unreadable as the arid tomes of its "Natural Theology." It was indeed a century of the bitterest possible debate between two opposing parties—the deists and freethinkers on the one hand and the orthodox apologists on the other. But what makes the whole controversy such dead mutton to us is that the presuppositions which were held *in common* by both parties now seem to us to be plainly untrue. Yet to the eighteenth century they seemed so obviously true that nobody was really capable of doubting them. By the third quarter of the century the debate had been carried about as far as it could be carried on the existing platform, and at last it must have been evident even to the combatants themselves that they were making for the doldrums; yet

they could not imagine what other platform there could ever again be. But the historian can now see how the beginnings of a new age were even then manifesting themselves—in influences so diverse, for instance, as those of Wesley and Rousseau. And it was not long before a wholly new platform of debate was to be found.

It is often said in Germany that what the theology of Barth has done has been similarly to lead us out of the doldrums of the liberal-conservative (or, as we preferred to say in America, the modernist-fundamentalist) issue by antiquating the whole debate and setting up an entirely new platform, thus once again infusing vitality into theological discourse. The opposition of modernist and fundamentalist seems at last to be genuinely transcended, so that it is difficult to say to which party Barth is more opposed. It is, however, with the "corrective" which he offers to our recent *liberalism* that the editor has particularly asked me to concern myself here.

WHAT then is the great error which Barth finds to have been present in our liberal religious thought? Perhaps, above all, it is what another German thinker, Paul Tillich, has called its "self-sufficient finitude." Our religion had, for the first time in history, centered itself more in man than in God and more in time than in eternity. The religion of our forefathers was always dominated by the realization of the soul's eternal destiny, but our modern religion had lost this eschatological note and had come to concern itself almost exclusively with our brief span of existence on this planet. Indeed we had almost come to the belief that the present span was all right as it was, even if there were no "perfect round" in heaven to complete its "arc."

And not only was this present life all right, but we who lived it were all right too! Our fathers thought poorly of the race of man—not indeed as he had ideally been meant to be, but as he had actually turned out; they were agreed that human nature was, if not totally corrupt, at least very nearly so. And they were quite sure that man was utterly unable to raise himself out of his present miserable condition. His only hope, they believed, must be in the grace of God.

But our recent liberalism felt very dif-

ferently. It trusted rather in the fundamental goodness of human nature, and taught that what was needed for our improvement was not a "new birth" proceeding from an utterly transcendent source but rather a drawing-out of what was already latent within us. Regeneration thus gave place to "self-expression" and "the development of personality." Salvation came to be regarded as taking place not by the justifying act of God but by the gradual upward progress of the human race itself, running (as it were) under its own steam. Men, we believed, tend to get better as they get older; and the race likewise gets better as it gets older. Progress has been the law of history. Each succeeding century shows an improvement in knowledge and wisdom and goodness over the preceding one. And this progress is due to our own "creativity." That was a word our fathers reserved for God, but we had lately grown fond of applying it to ourselves; for it was something within us rather than anything beyond us upon which we relied for our betterment.

On the basis of this changed doctrine of creation we had to rewrite our whole doctrine of man. Where our fathers had stressed his bondage, we began to stress his "autonomy." Where they had stressed grace and even predestination, we began to stress the freedom of the human will. Our fathers had indeed rejoiced in the freedom of the Christian man; but the freedom they rejoiced in was the freedom of *non posse peccare*, of not being able to sin, whereas the freedom we were now rejoicing in was the freedom of *posse non peccare*, of being able to sin or not to sin as we chose.

THE doctrine of God had likewise to be rewritten to suit our new prepossessions. God ceased to be a transcendent Being and became an immanent Being. He was to be found not above but within. Our fathers would have said that by looking within we would be more likely to find the devil, and that God was rather to be found by looking away from ourselves. Similarly, where our forefathers had stressed the sovereignty of God, we preferred to think of Him as an Ally. We were not subjects but fellow laborers; and we rejoiced that authority for such an outlook seemed to be afforded by one or two passages in the New Testament. Moreover, our fathers had taught that God was sufficient unto Himself and had no need of our assistance in running His universe; so that in serving Him it was only ourselves we were benefiting, and not He. But we found such a view much too humbling to our human pride of performance, and preferred to hold that our human function

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yourself squarely before the portraiture of Jesus in the Gospels. The more profoundly and intimately you understand Christ the more adequate is your grasp of the nature of God.

Glimpses into the Nature of God

When Jesus said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father," He was talking in terms such as no man before Him had used. Others had pointed out different aspects of God. Amos had said, God is just. Hosea had sobbed out of a heart of deep emotion, God is love. Isaiah had told men that God was holy. Micah had said that God was of such a nature as to make as His sole requirements of men justice, mercy, trustful humility. Jeremiah had discovered how God searched his own individual heart and dealt with him as a unit of independent value. And other thinkers had seen things in the Divine Nature which these greatest in Israel had not fully seen.

The Revelation of a Life

No nation has so deeply contributed to our insight into the nature of God as have the Israelites. Yet each insight was fragmentary and imperfect. Each thinker caught but one aspect of the Eternal Reality of God. Jesus did not lay His supreme emphasis upon *telling* men what was true about God. The truth was not adequately expressed in the ideas. His *life* was His best medium of revelation. The Fourth Gospel puts it in classic utterance when it says, "The Life was the light of men." Men saw Jesus and they thought God. No New Testament writer caught the process aspect of this growing insight into God's nature as well as the one who wrote the opening sentence in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in a Son.

The "Son" is Jesus.

The Way to God

If you want to find God, if you are honestly eager to know His nature, to discover for yourself His reality, to get your own life related to Him, go to Jesus. Jesus is our most clear, direct, and satisfactory guidance to God.

I think I hear the question that this awakens in many a Leaguer's mind. Suppose that is true. How may I come to Jesus? Where shall I find Him?

You will find Jesus most simply and most clearly by reading the four approaches to Him in our New Testament. I should read the four Gospels, but I should start with only one. Take Mark, for example, who gives the briefest story and the most living account. After Mark take Matthew with his rich recollection of the words and teachings of Jesus. Then take Luke with his great social emphasis on Jesus in action—healing, comforting, encouraging, and inspiring. Then take John with his gospel's

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brooding earnestness and its desire to fit Jesus into the whole universe. I am perfectly clear that no honestly searching Leaguer can read through these four Gospels without having God become a reality in his own experience in a new way. And if already he has read them, let him start in afresh. The Gospels do not become "old stuff." We cannot read them like another book. For we find them reading us, searching us, and making us hunger for a new quality of life in His spirit and by His power.

Deaconess Aid

THE regular business meeting of the Deaconess Aid Society of New England, Inc., was held in Copley Church, Boston, on Tuesday, Nov. 7. Mrs. J. Franklin Knotts led the devotions. Mrs. C. S. Otto and Mrs. J. C. Wingett were pourers at tea, which was served at the close of the meeting.

CLAUDIA C. DEACON, Clerk.

District Meeting at Natick

THE semiannual meeting of Framingham District Woman's Foreign Missionary Society was held in Fisk Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, Natick, on Tuesday, Nov. 14. Mrs. Jessie Felch, second vice-president, presiding. Greeting and welcome were extended by Mrs. Floyd Foster. Devotional messages were given by Mrs. Mary Walpert and Rev. Guy H. Wayne, and addresses by Mrs. A. L. Lamont, Mrs. K. C. Reynolds, and Miss Jessie Marriott. Mrs. Boutilier reported the Branch annual meeting. A solo, "How Beautiful upon the Mountains," was sung by Mrs. Whitman Densmore. The attendance banner was awarded to Marlboro.

JENNIE F. EARNSBY, Rec. Sec.

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was to help God in His divine task; and the conception of Service, in this changed meaning, became the dominant category of nineteenth-century religious thought. Some even went so far as to draw God Himself down into the temporal process, and make Him a struggling, growing God.

And of course the doctrine of salvation had to be rewritten too. Where our fathers had spoken of man seeking God, we now spoke of God seeking man. As Barth puts it, God who had always been the subject in the religious relationship now became the object of it. We found God instead of being found by Him. Faith and not grace was given the priority. This new soteriology carried with it, of course, an equally radical change in our Christology. What we now saw in Christ was not God coming down into our human life, but merely a very remarkable man raising himself up to God.

WHAT Barthianism has done has been (and here I state the case in its very lowest terms) to shake our confidence in the obvious correctness of this whole outlook. He has made us aware of our presuppositions. He has made us see how unsuspectingly we allowed ourselves to be caught up into the passing

intellectual fashions of our own particular age, and has made us ask ourselves whether in so doing we had not sadly compromised the true genius of our religion. Anthropocentrism, humanism, progressivism, evolutionism, immanentism, utopianism, subjectivism, activism—these are the "isms" against which Barth is always warning us; and it is obvious that they are none other than the basic categories of the period of thought that lies immediately behind us. We have been trying to view the Christian gospel in the light of these categories; but Barth now asks us, by way of a change, to try to view these categories in the light of the Christian gospel. We have been so eager to accommodate the gospel to "modern thought"; let us now endeavor rather to accommodate our modern thought to the gospel.

It is very clear, however, that in turning his back upon the categories of our recent liberal habit of thought Barth does not stand alone. Indeed he is to be regarded much more as a symptom of the changed outlook than as being himself the source of it. A parallel movement of thought is to be discerned, not only among the majority of other German theologians, but also among such philosophers as Grisebach, Tillich, Buber, and Heidegger, as well as in many of the younger thinkers in France and England and elsewhere. Writers like Tillich and T. E. Hulme have helped us to realize how even the recent developments in art are to be interpreted as a parallel reaction against the nineteenth-century mentality. The distinguished art-critic, Waldemar George, said recently in connection with these developments that "not since the Dark Ages has Europe gone back on herself in such vast proportions."

IN view of such a situation it behooves us, on the one hand, to allow the glaring light of this Barthian criticism to play as freely as possible upon the presuppositions of our existing thought. But, on the other hand, it behooves us to keep our heads; and especially to be on our guard against the danger of merely *reverting* to any outlook that prevailed before our modern liberalism first began to enter its emphatic protest. To do that would be to refuse to learn the lesson that history has to teach us, and to invite a repetition of the same weary round. In having our eyes opened to the weakness of liberalism we must not allow ourselves to become blind to its true strength and greatness. There is indeed a good deal that might be said about the dangers of Barthianism in this direction, but it was about its use as a corrective to tendencies of an opposite kind that the editor asked me to write on this occasion. And that I have done.