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Man in the Light of the Humanity of Jesus, by J.B. Souček

(Karl Barth's contribution to a Christological Anthropology)

(Karl Barth: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik. III.2. Die Lehre von der Schöpfung. 2: Das Geschöpf. Evangelischer Verlag Zollikon-Zürich 1948. 800 pages. Price, bound 35 Swiss francs)

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In the immense plan of his vast Dogmatik Karl Barth had by Spring 1948 reached the second half-volume of the third part. His life-work thus extends to over four thousand five hundred pages. And it is still far from finished, still in fact nearer the beginning than the end, for it is in the midst of the doctrine of Creation, which follows the Prolegomena and the doctrine of God, and has yet to be completed with the doctrine of Reconciliation and Redemption. The volume just issued deals with Man as the centre of Creation, or at least as the only creature directly accessible and comprehensible to us. It is thus a contribution towards a theological anthropology.

Anyone who has the slightest knowledge of Karl Barth, or imagines that he knows him, will certainly be curious to see how he will dispose of this particular task. If there is one thing for which Barth is notorious, it is his rejection of natural theology, his opposition to any attempt to base the knowledge of faith and theological thinking on any other source than the revelation given in Jesus Christ, testified by Scripture and sealed by the Holy Spirit. Is it possible that this programme will be adequate to deal with Creation, that is, with the knowledge and explanation of the world and

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of Man's place in the world? And what after all is the sense of this programme? Does it not result in the divorce of the realm of faith from the realm of natural life and natural knowledge, does it not perhaps involve a certain rigidity and arbitrariness in face of the whole wealth of life and knowledge, and does it not lead eventually to dualism or asceticism?

These questions are not directly answered in the new volume, but to some extent the answer is given indirectly by the whole tone of this publication. It makes it clear that the usual summary attempts to explain the basic principles of Barth's thought are largely misleading and may easily produce distortions bordering on caricature. If we attempt in what follows to indicate the main line of this thinking on the particular theme of anthropology, we must warn the reader in advance that the work is so vast, so full of complex views and illustrations and so subtly shaded, that any attempt to summarize it, including our own, must run the risk of inadequate and inaccurate interpretation in some respect.

Now even when dealing with anthropology Barth consistently maintains his rejection of natural theology. It is not his intention first to construct a general picture of Man based on his observation or reflection, a picture of human nature with its possibilities and realities, and afterwards to compare and correct this picture according to the special stand-points of Christian faith. He is firmly resolved to take the special view of Christian faith as his starting-point, and so he looks primarily not to the world and to Man in general, but to Jesus Christ, and seeks to recognize Man in the humanity

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of Jesus. The execution of this programme is such that the reader must recognize - whether he is in agreement or not - that the charge of lack of interest in the world and in Man or the objection to dualistic and ascetic tendencies would be directed to the wrong address. Barth is indeed convinced that the understanding of creation, yes, and any real meeting not with abstract man but with the real Man, is impossible except in Jesus Christ; but in Him this meeting and understanding of reality does exist, and therefore it is a possibility for us too. It is evident that the motive for the rejection of natural theology by Barth is just his opposition to any form of dualism; there are not two sources of final truth, and of course there are not two truths. There is no gulf or even fissure between "cosmology" and "soteriology", between creation and covenant, between our knowledge of the world and the grace of reconciliation. This unity we recognize of course only by faith - but by faith we do indeed recognize it: we understand that creation is the outward foundation of God's covenant with Man, that the covenant is the inward proof and meaning of creation. This is certainly a daring view, but it is in accord with the testimony of the Bible, and if we ignore it the structure of faith must in the end disintegrate and our thinking lose touch with the concrete reality of Man.

It is advisable to add to this schematic outline of Barth's fundamental views two observations. The first is the technical reminder, that the rejection of natural theology may also be expressed in formal terms in this way, that

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Barth is firmly resolved to teach the priority of actuality over potentiality: God's free revelation is the primary reality and point of departure, while human reception, yes, even human receptivity, is secondary and derivative. This intellectual pattern has long been a feature of Barth's exposition, but in this book it is expressed with special emphasis and distinctness. There is here a certain formal resemblance to some tendencies of contemporary philosophy, especially to existentialism. But in his analysis of the teaching of Jaspers, Barth separates himself from this philosophy, especially by his argument that it does not really attain to the reality of Man, but remains to the end imprisoned in mere potentiality. The second observation is of more general interest: it would be a mistake to deduce from Barth's fundamental principles that theology must or can ignore the results of research and study by general, scientific and philosophical anthropology. On the contrary, Barth follows this work with lively interest, and his accounts of it are not only comprehensive, but aim at the greatest possible and most positive understanding. Only he is convinced that this general anthropological study will never by itself penetrate to the essential reality of Man, but only to some more or less intelligible abstraction. For of course this isolated man in and for himself, which is the object of the study of general anthropology, is an abstraction: the real Man exists only in the presence of God and with his fellow-man, whom we recognize in the light of our meeting with the Man Jesus, who was Man for God and for His neighbour. The more clearly general

anthropological research concedes the abstractness and the consequent tentativeness and the ultimate inadequacy of its views, the more useful will be the service it can render.

What it can do is to discover the individual features, the phenomena of human existence, which can then, for the purpose of knowing the real Man, be transformed into symptoms of real humanity.

We have already mentioned the fundamental explanation of human existence which results from Barth's assumptions. Anthropology is not the same as christology, the knowledge of man in general is not identical with the knowledge of the humanity of Jesus, but it is deduced and derived from it. That which is reality in the perfect humanity of Jesus, exists in the humanity of the rest of men as a destiny and a possibility willed by God. Here again, the attentive reader will notice that the same arrangement of reality and possibility, of actuality and potentiality applies. Jesus is Man living fully for God. Man is a creature of God, destined to live in the presence of God. That is his essential substance, beyond which there is nothing deeper. This means that he exists, not as a self-contained being, but as a historical being, a being in history. By historical Barth does not of course mean quite the same as mere historicity, in the sense of being inserted in the series of earthly events. He is concerned in the first place with the fact that man exists primarily in action in the presence of God and with God. He exists only on this basis, that God has called and is calling him into existence; and he is so called in order to live in gratitude, and in order to

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respond to God with his knowledge, his obedience, his worship, and to do all this in freedom. This calling and destiny of Man is the content of God's creative act, and with regard to this creative act we must affirm that Man is good.

In his present, concrete reality, however, Man is corrupted by sin - and so here everyone who is even a little versed in Christian doctrine will immediately supply the correction to this thought. Certainly, Barth also supplies this correction. But the matter is not so simple with him as it usually appears to be with other theologians. We are here faced with a very difficult problem of Barth's thinking. It is not easy to express it justly, if only because in the meantime he has only dealt with this subject partially. But while this is still only on the fringe of the subject, one is convinced that the doctrine of sin belongs systematically to the doctrine of reconciliation. The question is approximately as follows. Barth shows more and more emphatically that there is no balance and symmetry between grace and judgment, between election to life and rejection. Grace manifestly and finally prevails over judgment, election over rejection. In this connection he says, that even the reality of sin must not be conceived as if it had any fixed and obvious place within the theological system. Sin is always seen in faith and in theology not as possibility, but as a fundamental impossibility, absurdity, mystery. It can only be encountered as a reality, but it cannot by any means be explained away, not even by assigning it to a fixed place in theological thinking. Faith and theology can only encounter sin with ever new horror and protest. Or to

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put it from another point of view: sin is for faith in its deepest reality always sin covered, sin forgiven. It does not belong to the original divine creation. Already in Genesis it is said, moreover, that God created light, but not at all that He created darkness. It is said only that He divided the light from the darkness, whose existence is thus left in its secret and unacceptable abnormality. Theological thinking therefore must indeed take the reality of sin very seriously, but not with the absolute, deadly seriousness which the reality of reconciliation makes impossible. Therefore the doctrine of sin must never be taught as an independent theme nor yet as a central theme. And never must it be admitted, that a really sinful man might succeed by his sin in carrying out a second creation, in founding an independent kingdom of evil competing with the kingdom of God. That will never succeed - and therefore it is necessary to speak even of the corruption of the original creation very plainly and seriously to be sure, but always as it were in brackets, with the consciousness that this corruption will never meet with absolute success, that it will never obliterate the primal goodness of the divine creation. These ideas are indeed difficult and of course they provoke many questions. They have also been the object of sharp criticism on the part of some Lutheran theologians, who have the impression that Barth underestimates the reality of what the Bible calls the demonic world. Meantime we may at least draw attention to them and add, that they may provide an explanation for the peculiar positiveness and hopefulness, which pervade all Barth's

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recent contributions to general human problems, and also for the breadth and fervour of his interests.

Man, however, does not exist only in the presence of God. As Jesus was also Man for his fellow-man in his sacrifice and in his whole existence, so every man is called and destined to be, not indeed for his fellow-man (this only Jesus in the perfection of His humanity can achieve) but with him. Man is not created for solitude, but for society, for existence with his counterpart, also with his human counterpart. According to Barth's exegesis it is in this that the image of God consists as God is not and does not want to be alone, but exists even in His innermost divinity as the love of the Father to the Son, so too Man is not, must not be solitary. The greatest denial of humanity and the greatest curse of man is the attempt to understand humanity as the essence, quality or structure of solitary man. "Humanity without neighbour" is a profound error, of which Nietzsche was the greatest prophet. To him Barth devotes a long exposition, kindly and appreciative too, but in the essential point he denounces him more strongly than any other thinker with whom he deals in his remarkable digressions. Nietzsche, however, is not alone in this. He only expresses with rare consistency and sincerity - and in this lies his strength - tendencies of the modern age which have been widespread since the Renaissance, tendencies more moderately and temperately proclaimed, for example, by Goethe, and which have interfered so much with public, political, and social programmes and endeavours. Everything will depend, humanly speaking, on the supersession of this "humanity without neighbour" by a true humanity, with a vision of the reality

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of the concrete fellow-man. But is this possible on any other basis than the knowledge that society is not something extraneous to Man, but forms his innermost substance, because it is the very core of man's creaturehood, as it was revealed in the Man Jesus? The natural expression and basic form of this original substance is the fact, that man was created not solitary and individual, but as man and woman. This, according to Gen. 1,27, is the concrete content of the image of God, for which Man was created. On tens, yes, on hundreds of pages (already in the preceding volume III.1.) Barth confirms with Biblical exegesis and develops with bold imagination the wonderful picture of what human existence means in this, the only natural and original division of mankind. Here in nature the loving purpose of God is reflected. Here in an original pattern the primal, human substance of all human relationships is laid down. It is an existence in which men seek each other face to face, in which they obey each other, and converse with each other, and help each other, and do it all gladly, with spontaneity, joy and freedom. This is what it means to share natural, human existence. In this connection Barth turns sternly against those theologians, who imagine that they are exalting the glory of the grace of God when they slander Man and deny him any positive possibilities. The punishment for that will always be that such theology ends by belittling and distorting in some way the image of the real, essential grace of God, and smuggling into it these same human characteristics - but merely human characteristics - which were so churlishly denied to natural man. In this connection too he takes his

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stand against a widespread theological fashion, and defends the Greek, or Hellenistic spirit, which is certainly demonic when perverted, but which still only expressed powerfully one side of human nature: its spontaneity, joyfulness, freedom, which is the meaning of the Greek conception eros, and which is the basis of the undeniable fact, that in the civic, political sphere too ancient Greece is the motherland of freedom.

We have so far only given account of the ideas in the first half of the new volume. The last two extensive chapters are devoted on the one hand to the existence of Man as the soul of his body, and on the other hand to his existence in his own given and limited and therefore also finite time. We can only point out briefly that these two closing chapters are linked together and have a common underlying tone. Soul and body are not the same, but they cannot be abstracted and separated from each other. In the Bible Man is a unity; soul and body are a unified creation of God, or: they are given in such a way, that Man is given a soul, which is the biblical expression for God in His movement towards Man. Any sort of abstraction, whether idealistic or materialistic, is false, and the concreteness of the biblical view does not fit any theory of parallelism or of the mutual influence of soul and body. Equally impossible is the Greek theory of the soul as an immortal substance separable from the body. By no means. Man exists as the soul of his body, and the soul too is mortal together with the body. His hope is not in the permanence of his imaginary higher substance, but only in the resurrection, that is, in God Himself.

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In a further chapter the same theme is developed in dealing with human limitation in time, with human finiteness. This finiteness we know of course in its concrete form as death, and it is joined with the reality of divine judgment on sinful men, and does not therefore belong in this form to the goodness of God's creation. But if it is true that Jesus Himself bore the curse of death and wiped it out by His own death, then finiteness itself loses its cursedness, and becomes a natural sign of human dependence on grace. It is thus something which can and must be accepted in peace and with gratitude. The hope of the believer is not a kind of endless prolongation of his existence in time. It is that he, must as he is, in his finiteness, (and thus already only the man that has been) will meet with God in the "moment" of resurrection (I Cor. 15,51) and will have a share in His eternity, which is essentially different from existence in time.

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This again is a very difficult exegesis. The reader will inevitably ask the question, whether the soberness of Biblical faith, rejecting all illusions about the imaginary higher elements of man, and accepting the earthliness and finiteness of his being, is not here too finely polished. Is not the Christian hope too much narrowed down, until it becomes a quite unimaginable moment of meeting with God, or an elevation of the mere finite, past, and not-to-be-continued existence of man into the light of God's grace, God's forgiveness, and God's purpose? Perhaps it will be necessary to wait for further explanation of Barth's views on this matter

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in the next volumes of the Dogmatik. Meanwhile it is possible to remind non-theologians, that this theology certainly cannot be defined as abstract spiritualism or dualism; and to remind theologians, that in Barth's expositions of the finiteness of man there are obviously introduced some consequences of the rejection of the doctrine of purgatory. Man is given only this limited and finite time to live and to reach a decision about his immortality. He is not given any prospect of a continuation and prolongation of this unique temporal existence. This has, of course, fundamental importance for ethics. It gives to all decisions a deep earnestness and urgency which would have been lacking, if our hope had been deliverance from the limitation of time; instead of which we may and must trust only and solely in the eternal God.

Altogether we have before us a work which is monumental not only in extent. Certainly there is in its execution much that is problematic, flung out in the rough, sometimes with too much of genius and massiveness. None the less it does prove, that in his daring decision to seek a foundation and anchorage for theological thinking only in revelation in Jesus Christ and in the act of faith in Him, Barth has been given an inner freedom resulting in great breadth of outlook, which does indeed regard nothing human as alien, and a versatility and at the same time a peculiar justice and appreciativeness even in judging thinkers very far removed from him. This combination of definiteness and breadth gives to Barth's work a peculiar attraction, and makes him an important orientation-point and corrective. For without such a

corrective theological thought tends to wander into blind alleys and all sorts of snares. To this must be added our simple thanks for the welcome, reliable and considered teaching about a number of important theological and philosophical thinkers, and not least for the many extensive biblical exegeses, which, in spite of all the occasional arbitrariness and lack of finish, still penetrate to the heart of the matter. In sum, here is a work which Protestant theology for long decades will not be able to ignore, and must reckon with one way or another.

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