

Contemporary Movements in Theology

The Influence of Karl Barth

By IAN HENDERSON

LAST week, Professor Raven laid emphasis on the need for Christian theology to keep in touch with secular thought in general and with scientific thought in particular. He further maintained that liberal theology does not have the same meaning on this island that it has on the Continent. I think both these points are true and important. What I would like to do is, so to speak, to combine them and carry them a little farther. For it seems to me that the divergence between British and continental thought does not stop at a mere disagreement about the meaning of the term 'liberal theology'. Secular thought on the Continent is conditioned by existentialist thinkers such as Heidegger and Jaspers, a few of whose works are translated into English, and whose influence, consequently, is very much less here than it is elsewhere.

The Nature of Existentialist Thinking

The result is that it is easy for us to do continental theologians an injustice. It is easy for us to dismiss them as obscurantists who are failing to meet the challenge of secular thought, when actually they are, in various ways, reacting to a kind of secular thinking with which we are not very familiar. This has a bearing on the fact that discussion of the relation between religion and science is perhaps disappointingly infrequent in recent continental theology. At least one reason for this is the fact that in the non-theological thought of the Continent one can detect a tendency to doubt whether the scientific approach to reality is the only one, and hence whether a final view of life can be based on its results alone. I suppose this all began with Kierkegaard's championship of the claims of existential as against speculative thinking. What he meant by existential thinking has been described very well by Dr. Brock as the kind of thinking involved in the 'choice of profession or a conflict in love, a catastrophic change in social conditions, or the imminence of one's own death'. We have all had some experience of that kind of thinking and we know how different it is from the impersonal, dispassionate thinking of the scientist in his laboratory or the professional philosopher in his study.

In our own day, Dr. Martin Buber has reached a similar result by pointing out that in life we make a twofold approach to reality, through the 'I-thou' and the 'I-it' relationships respectively. The scientific approach to reality is only valid within the limits of the second of these relationships. For the scientific method is the method of experiment; experiment is controlled observation; and the attitude of the dispassionate observer is ultimately inadequate in personal relationships. While it is perfectly legitimate for a chemist in his laboratory to apply a catalyst to a solution in order to observe its reactions, if the same scientist were to fail to bring home a birthday present to his wife simply in order to observe her reaction to this somewhat violent stimulus, he would certainly hear about it from her. And, according to Buber, quite rightly. For what he would have done, in such a case, would have been to apply to the 'I-thou' relation a technique which is only legitimate in the 'I-it' one. Thus, since the scientific method is limited to the 'I-it' relation, a final philosophy based on scientifically attained results alone is inevitably incomplete.

In the work of Martin Heidegger, just because his main interest is in ontology, we seem to be nearer the customary intellectual approach to reality. But that he, too, diverges from traditional ways is shown by his criticism of the application of the Aristotelean categories to human existence, by his warning men not to become too much absorbed in the world of things and by his summons to them to a concern with the possibilities of their human existence and, in particular, with the ultimate factor of their own death.

The writers I have mentioned are not foolish enough to try to disparage the immense achievements of science, or the invaluable discipline which scientific activity has provided for the human spirit. All they query is whether the only approach to reality is that of the impersonal, dispassionate, objective thinking of the philosopher, rendered more exact by the use, wherever possible, of the experimental method of science. They thus incidentally raise the doubt whether

western man, in relying on that one approach to reality, has not developed his intellect at the expense of the rest of himself, in somewhat the same way as a convict in a treadmill develops his leg muscles to the detriment of his general health. To some, their view will seem only a form of irrationalism. Yet it does, at any rate, offer a diagnosis of the spiritual ailment of western man. It is one of the symptoms of the latter that he is able to discover atomic energy but is not at all confident of his ability to use it aright. But we are not so much concerned with the truth of this kind of outlook as with the reaction of contemporary German theology toward it. It is obvious that this kind of philosophy is nearer the Christian position than, say, the materialism which was sometimes erected on the basis of nineteenth-century science. Its very nearness can be embarrassing. As Bultmann says, when accused of seeing the Gospel through the eyes of Heidegger, the question which has to be faced is whether this new philosophy has not superseded theology.

I have mentioned Bultmann, and his essay, *Neues Testament und Mythologie*, which initiated the lively *Entmythologisierung* controversy, is a landmark in the relations between Christian theology and existentialism. It is true that ostensibly the thesis of the essay is simply that within the New Testament a distinction must be drawn between the essential Christian message, as true today as ever, and the mythology of the first century, which is not in itself specifically Christian and which science has made it impossible for the man of today to accept. It is also true that Bultmann distinguishes his position from that of the liberal theology of fifty years ago in two important respects. In the first place, he maintains that Christianity is an event, something which God has done for us in Christ and not just a set of timeless moral truths. Secondly, he maintains that the mythology of the New Testament must be interpreted and not just eliminated. But the significant thing is that the key to his treatment, both of the action of God in Christ, and of the mythology, seems to be found in something which he takes over from Heidegger: that man's openness to himself is one of the factors which make him what he is; it is integral to his being. Here is the tool which, Bultmann thinks, makes it possible for us to get on with the de-mythologising of the New Testament. Once we interpret the mythology of the New Testament not as primitive science, but as man's way of understanding his own existence, we get at the real truth behind it.

Love instead of Enmity

Even more important is the application of this category to what God has done in Christ. It enables Bultmann to hold that if, as a result of Christ, we are able to understand our existence differently, then He has effected a real change in us. And this is how Bultmann does interpret what God has done for us in Christ. Without Christ man is constrained to think of his existence as at the mercy of forces indifferent and hostile to him and to seek a purely illusory security in the things of this world. As a result of Christ he can think of his life in quite different terms and can go forward in the confidence 'that what is invisible, unknown, beyond his control meets him as love . . . and means for him not death but life'.

It would be improper for me to comment on the New Testament interpretation of so great an exegete as Bultmann. And it would be unfair not to point out that Bultmann considers that his view conflicts with that of Heidegger at two decisive points. First, his view of sin as a fallen state from which man cannot free himself by his own decision, and secondly, his view of the consequent need for and actuality of deliverance by God in Christ, are incompatible with the existentialist position. Yet the resemblances between his position and that of the philosophers I have mentioned are so striking as to lead one to conclude that here there is something like a synthesis between Christian theology and existentialism. Thus, there is Bultmann's insistence that St. Paul's real view of the spirit is to be found in passages such as 'If we live in the spirit, let us walk in the spirit' where the imperative accompanies the indicative and not in such a

KRA 5540

passage as 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 44, where the spirit is spoken of as a sort of supernatural material. Such a view at least reminds one of Kierkegaard's emphasis on decision and Heidegger's insistence that the categories of *Dasein* must not be confused with those of *Vorhandenheit* and hence that the spirit must not be thought of as a quasi-physical entity. Again, when Barth criticises Bultmann on the ground that, on such a view, the real event of Easter is not the risen Christ but simply the rise of faith in the disciples, one feels that the element in Bultmann which exposes him to such a criticism is that for him, the Resurrection as an objective historical event does not count for very much. He considers that a real Resurrection faith must be *geschichtlich*, a personal meeting with Christ, and not *historisch*, the objective approach of the historian toward an event in the past. There seems to be behind this something like Buber's distinction between the I-thou and the I-it relationships and in addition the assumption that if the Resurrection is an objective event in space and time, the latter and inadequate relation is the only one we can have toward it.

A Recurring Theme

Barth does not accept Bultmann's synthesis of Christian theology and existentialism. That such a verdict was inevitable can be seen from Barth's comments on Schleiermacher's not dissimilar attempt to effect a reconciliation between Christianity and the Romantic philosophy of his day. Highly appreciative though he is of Schleiermacher, Barth none the less insists that in so far as he adopted the standpoint of the apologist, he forsook that of the theologian. Barth's apparent praise of Schleiermacher when he says that his relation to Christianity is like that of a virtuoso to the subject-matter of which he is a master, is not really praise. It is because he is a master of his subject that Schleiermacher is able to draw from it those elements in it which are most acceptable or least offensive to the thought of his time. But Barth contends that a theologian is in right relation to his subject, not when he is a master of it, but when it has mastered him. This constraint laid upon the theologian is a recurring theme in Barth's work. In an early criticism of liberal theologians he accuses them of measuring the Church's proclamation by standards drawn from philosophy, ethics and politics; he goes on to maintain that it is not only the alien origin of such criteria, but the very fact that choice is made, which is enough to show the fundamental wrongness of such an approach to theology. The basic rule of Christian dogmatics, he says in a later volume, is that any constituent part of it is only to be accepted when it is imposed on the hearing and teaching Church by the attestation of the Word of God in Scripture.

This stress on obedience as a cardinal theological virtue links up with two other elements in Barth's teaching. The first is his attitude to the tradition of the Church. The Church which sets up its own tradition as authoritative is apt to forget that it is under God. We may not agree with Barth here, but in fairness to him we must remember that it is because he wants the voice of the Apostles to be authoritative in the Church that he sets the Bible above tradition. And the emphasis on obedience accounts for another element in Barth's teaching which has come in for a certain amount of acute criticism in this country. I mean his separation between truth and revelation. Why Barth does not like a revelation in the form of propositions is that it is a revelation toward which we could take up a neutral attitude, the attitude which we take up toward a statement when we neither accept nor reject it but simply note it. What he contends—and he would maintain that his position here owes nothing to existentialist philosophy—is that revelation always summons us to decision, to the decision, namely, whether we are going to obey it or not.

If Barth cannot adopt the attitude of Bultmann towards existentialism, what line does he take? A certain piquancy is added to the situation by the fact that Barth's colleague at Basel is Karl Jaspers. Perhaps no university in the world has had two such illustrious figures occupying the chairs of theology and philosophy simultaneously since the time when Schleiermacher and Hegel served together in the University of Berlin. Yet, at first sight, the standpoints of the two men can only seem utterly opposed. For Barth every doctrine is seen in the light of Christ. He breaks with Calvin as soon as the latter's doctrine of predestination is seen to be founded on a hidden decree of God apart from Christ. He refuses to erect his doctrine of the state on natural law or on the God who is revealed to us in creation and providence, and insists that it must be founded on the God who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. His anthropology is based, he says, on Christo-

logy. One has sometimes the feeling that, by so doing, Barth overloads his Christology and raises problems which cry out for solution. His interpretation even of the doctrine of reprobation in terms of Christ, for instance, means that he lays himself open to all the objections which McLeod Campbell urged against any view which held that Christ was exposed to the wrath of God. But there is something impressive about a theology so many-sided and so Christocentric.

The thought of Jaspers, on the other hand, however sympathetic toward religion it may be, is anything but Christocentric. For him the true turning point in the world's history is not the birth of Christ but the period 800-300 B.C. It is that period, when man, for the first time, simultaneously and independently in China, India and the west, learned to stand outside the traditional pattern of his life and to question whether it was the best pattern for him, that Jaspers calls the Axial Era. In it, for the first time, man attained at once to uncertainty about himself and to an intoxicating vision of his own possibilities. It, not the Birth of Christ, is the great turning point. Furthermore, the element in the religious attitude which Jaspers singles out for repeated criticism—namely, its claim to the possession of an exclusive truth—is one which for the Christian, at any rate, is bound up with his relation to Christ. It is because we believe that God became incarnate in Christ as nowhere else, that some trace of exclusiveness, in some form or another, must cling to our outlook.

Yet however opposed Barth and Jaspers may be in outlook, in the writings of both one can detect a realisation at once of the tremendous 400-year upsurge of European vitality and of the cessation of that upsurge in our own lifetime. For Jaspers, Europe is unique in that here alone has the Axial Era led ultimately to the scientific and technical movement which in turn has now brought about a new age, which is on the point of beginning and for which Jaspers can find no parallel save in the Promethean Era of the discovery of fire. In seeking to find reasons for this uniqueness of Europe, Jaspers is led to conclude that one reason why modern science arose here and nowhere else is that the religion of the Bible had already made the peninsula its adopted home. To those who have read Jaspers' grounds for maintaining this, his comparison of the doctrine of creation of all things by God with the interest of the scientist in everything, an interest which refuses to call anything unclean, and his other comparison of the scientific hypothesis subjected always to the empirical data with the Divine *Logos*, not resting in its own perfection but going out to the *Alogos* and becoming subject to it, make it clear that here is one who is by no means blind to the distinctive features of the Christian religion.

Three Choices

That this concern for the European situation provides a meeting ground for the thought of Jaspers and Barth can also be seen from one of the latter's criticisms of the former. Jaspers claims that in the boundary situations of suffering, guilt and death, man is faced with the ultimate decision between defiance and surrender, and through the choice of the latter can find transcendence and thus an answer—though not one which can be stated objectively—to the riddle of his being. To that Barth replies that there is a third alternative, lassitude or indifference, and that the plight of European man today is not unconnected with the fact that in these boundary situations he, unlike American or Russian man, is choosing that third alternative.

It would be foolish to minimise the difference between Barth and Jaspers. The transcendence of the former bridges a Fall and presupposes a revelation unknown to the latter. Yet in both of them is something of an element which for Jaspers has gone to make Europe great: what he calls the polarities, between Catholic and Protestant, humanist and Christian, church and state. As Jaspers points out, it has been impossible to accept any one of these alternatives without being mentally stretched by having to defend it over against its opposite. It is because he does not wish these fruitful tensions lost that he combats the religious claim to exclusive truth. Yet can we not say that such polarities exist within Christianity itself? The tension between prophet and priest, between the Synoptic Gospels and the fourth Gospel, between the Epistles of St. Paul and the Epistle of St. James have been there from the beginning. And those who know Barth not just as the theologian of transcendence, but also as the lover of Mozart, the appreciator of Schleiermacher, the man who could sum up his message to an audience behind the Iron Curtain in words of Kant, 'Have the courage to use your own understanding', must feel that in him, as in Jaspers, these fruitful tensions exist.

—Third Programme

*This may interest you
Don't thank! -*

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