

Recent Theological Trends.

THE period before the 1914-1918 War was full of interest alike for the theologian and the social reformer. We seemed to be looking on at the transformation of our society by the spread and development of Christian ideas. The Nation and the Churches seemed all set for a forward movement that would change the whole aspect of our national life, when, like a bolt from the blue, came the first European War, with all manner of repercussions on the national spirit and outlook.

In the theological realm the War wrought mighty changes. In that grim ordeal, men of all creeds and classes were forced to get down to the bed-rock of reality. In individual thought and experience, as in discussion-conclaves, many found themselves asking questions for which they could find no answer. The real quest was to discover what was vital in Christianity, what was the significant Christian experience. It was recognised, and it has been recognised even more strongly in the second European War, that in the stern realities of battle it is the realisation of God that matters, and that those who had known the full stress of the struggle had small patience with anything but sheer reality. Theologians themselves were confronted by searching questions, and sought some authoritative word.

Ere many years had passed we were hearing about the Barthian School and the Barthian Theology. There is no need to repeat the oft-told story of the origin of Karl Barth's theology of the Word of God. But it may be worth while inquiring to what extent we are justified in accepting the domination of theological thought that its main conclusions have been allowed to impose. That goes also for the whole school associated with Barth: for Brunner, for, save the mark, Kierkegaard, whose theological remains were exhumed so many years after his burial to support his successors. One of our most eminent theologians said ruefully some years ago that he had lived to see everything he had fought for in the world of theology thrown over. Many are sharing his sense of frustration as they find the new parrot-cries repeated by writer upon writer with such rasping assurance. Having fought for liberty of thought and the recognition of variety of view, we do not take kindly to those who would snatch from our hands the banners we have at great cost won. We do not take kindly to rigidity of thought or stridency of expression.

Accustomed to believe that the truth about God is too vast to be fully contained in any one mould, we resent the suggestion that at long last men have appeared to whom alone it has been fully revealed, by whom alone it is fully expressed.

Undoubtedly the main trend of our time has been in the direction of a hefty and intolerant dogmatism. Not for long have the pundits been so sure of themselves. At last they have found something they believe to be final and beyond question. All our vaunted bases of acceptability: all our, in their eyes, feeble compromises: all our attempts at reconciliation of contending positions are to-day swept aside by a relentless either-or formula which holds a pistol to our heads and bids us stand-and-deliver. The positive gains that had—so we thought—been registered, the progressive movement we had traced through the jungle of so many crude undergrowths, our faith in the light that lighteth every man, are declared to be but profitless illusion. In an age that has witnessed the power of a political dogmatism to lay a world in ruins, in which, in its latest phase, one bomb has outmoded all other weapons of warfare, we need not be astonished at the rise of a theological movement which is forthright and uncompromising, and gives short shrift to all its predecessors. Our only comfort in the midst of the debacle is in some knowledge of history and its way of rectifying extravagant emphasis in the process of time.

It is not enough, in explanation of the recrudescence of dogmatism, to say that we are living in abnormal, even cataclysmic days. It is not enough to plead in support of this theological assertiveness that the times are out of joint and something summary must be done about it. Emergency measures, panic stand-points, may be necessary in time of war, in the world of affairs. Even there these are temporary, to be dropped when their work is done. But in the world of the mind, this attitude has no place. The emergency with which theology deals—the moral and spiritual condition of men—is with us all the time. It must be faced not in the light of the immediate moment, but *sub specie æternitatis*, in the light of the everlasting truth. Those of us who believe in the Progressiveness of Revelation, who are convinced that God is leading His people to an ever fuller understanding of His ways with men, as also to an ever enlarging appreciation of His Revelation in Christ, are not content to witness, unmoved and unprotesting, the scrapping of everything that has been gleaned by the use of man's intellect—directed, as we believe, by the Spirit of Truth which our Lord told us would be our guide and interpreter—at the *ipse dixit* of men who have been thrown off their balance by the tumultuous upheavals of the age.

The somewhat feeble response from the side of the formerly

prevailing schools of thought is not hard to understand. The upheaval caused by the War had weakened conviction in many quarters. Pre-occupation with war's practical problems turned men's minds away from theoretical considerations. The attitude of the open mind unfitted thinkers for the challenge of a flaming personal faith. There was a growing desire for something more definite in the matter of doctrine than for some time had been current. The shock to any form of optimism which was the result of the War pre-disposed men to listen to any strong positive voice. Perhaps the chief reason for so general an acquiescence was the fact that the new message went deeper than the views it combatted, by-passing most of the main topics that had been the subject of controversy. The Barthians did not trouble themselves with critical discussions. They were not concerned either to affirm or deny the truth of the evolutionary position. Barth himself had no qualms on the question of Biblical criticism. In some directions he went further than the furthest, being ready to criticise and amend not only the texts of the Scriptures, but even the *ipsisima verba* of our Lord. He touched the whole matter of Christian faith at a point much closer to the centre, resolving the entire issue into a contact, direct and dynamic, between the soul and the Word of God. We all know what brought him to this line of thought and action. He had proved the foolishness of preaching that did not grip men with the sense of God. He had discovered the secret of spiritual power, the secret of conversion, in the action of the Spirit of God through the agency of a Word that came alive and laid its grasp upon the individual soul. The inwardness of the Christian experience was in the Revelation of God that apprehended the soul and took it firmly in hand. There was nothing here from the side of man at all. Apart from the action of the Holy Spirit, man was unable either to accept or reject. He was just gripped by a power outside himself that brought him into the full blaze of the Divine Glory and moved him as it desired.

Here was a message that met the demand for stark reality. It was delivered with the accent of uncompromising authority. It brought God and man together—the basic necessity of any vital religion. It narrowed down the *esse* of religion to one short, sharp experience, thrusting on one side everything speculative or mystical as diversive rubbish and silencing all man's questionings and uncertainties. It sorted with a state of mind that was feeling the impact of tremendous challenges in other spheres of life and was already habituated to crisis. More, it was in harmony with the fundamentals of a recognised historic interpretation of the Christian faith and acceptable to many who had been unsettled, even bewildered, by the intellectual upheavals of

the time. Above all, it was a message that enthused those who fell for it, so that a new note crept into their preaching, a note of authority that cut through the polite and polished compromises that held sway for so long. Take up McConnachie's expositions of the Barthian formula and you hit upon something new and strange—a theologian who is so absolutely sure that he is absolutely right, that he does not shrink from telling you that you, who beg to differ, are absolutely wrong. Readers of John Baillie's recent books can detect a wavering from the philosophic calm of his earlier works. *The Interpretation of Religion* is out of print by now; he himself says some of it is out-of-date. No wonder that all our theologians are vitally affected by a message delivered in thunderous tones by a writer who is satisfied that he alone is in possession of the Truth. One *caveat* may be inserted here. It is fact that when Barth delivered his Gifford lectures in Aberdeen he was bitterly disappointed at the lack of interest on the part of the Scots clergy. No one who knows the Scots clergy would be surprised at their lack of interest in anything; certainly in anyone outside their own elect fellowship of scholars. Read any obituary of their departed giants, say Gossip's Moffat, and you will realise the wondrous weight of learning any almost unknown scholar bumps up against in a Church whose scholarship is the despair of the rest of the scholastic world and the unconcealed pride of its clergy. Read Mackintosh's *Types of Modern Theology* and see with what deftness of touch the masters are handled, with what calmness Barth himself is analysed and assessed. When the tumult and the shouting dies, he will probably be again disappointed at his inability to make them his devotees.

One is bound to admit the service rendered to Christianity by Barth and his followers in recovering the inner spiritual experience, and laying supreme emphasis on this. It is thanks to him that we hear in so many sermons to-day the demand that God take precedence in religious faith, that until we have made contact each for himself with the living God we have got and will get nowhere. Here is a return to that personal note which Baptists have always sought to stress. But we cannot estimate the permanent value of his contribution to theology until we reckon up the destructive influence of his dialectic. The worst is seen in Brunner's work on *The Philosophy of Religion*, in which, following his master's voice, he jettisons everything that has been done by thinkers like Galloway and Bowman. According to Brunner, following Barth, there is nothing in the Primitive Religions of any value to the scholar. The only worth-while Philosophy of Religion is the Philosophy of the Christian Religion—as he understands it. Kraemer, in his book *The Christian*

Message in a Non-Christian World, reveals the confusion into which his mind has been thrown as the result of his contact with Barthian thought. But that is only one part of the destruction of good work that must be laid to his charge. All man's seeking after God along other avenues is declared to be of no value at all. The belief that the Roots of Religion, as Baillie holds, are in the moral sense, is questioned; the gateway of mysticism, by which fine souls have entered into the celestial fellowship, is double-barred. Forgetting that it is by the action of his own mental faculties that he has come to his own findings, he discounts the action of man's mind altogether in the religious sphere. Schleiermacher's sense of need, surely to many one road to faith and experience of God, is set aside. Man's entire mental and spiritual capacity is in effect denied by this man, who cannot even allow that the soul, having yielded to God in one great experience, can be trusted to hold on to Him for the future; but insists that it must be prodded into activity by constantly-repeated spiritual urges, very much as a Diesel engine is kept running by an unbroken succession of explosions. Further, in limiting the vital spiritual experience to one standard form, he excludes from the fold of the awakened many who have undoubtedly found God and been found of Him in other ways. And in confining God's approach to the soul to forms that pre-suppose an acquaintance with theological language and thought he makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the wayfaring man, even if he is not a fool, to find the way of salvation.

One of the by-products of this movement is an excessive emphasis on the initiative of God in religious experience. Every other preacher one hears is at pains to proclaim the utter bankruptcy of man in moral and spiritual capital. The one and only remedy for every evil is to bring God on the scene; just as the inwardness of every form of evil, as well as all kinds of failure, is in leaving God out of account. Doubtless that is sound; but it needs elucidating and stating in much clearer terms. What is the exact content of the word God? The setting in which the name of God is used to-day often excludes the central New Testament concept of Fatherhood, so dear to our Lord, so rich in inspirational vitamins, so saving to moral and spiritual sanity in such a time as this. The popular conception, implied if not expressed, is rather that of a detective confronting us with menacing challenge. The popular conception of man denudes him of capacity of any sort in the moral and spiritual sphere. Shakespeare's brilliant soliloquy, "What a work is man," would find no support in the portrait of him by our present-day teachers. Even our Lord's "How much is a man better than a sheep" does not seem to have been accepted by these people as a wise and true

reflection. Even Nuremberg has two sides. Revealer of mankind at its lowest, it is also a throne of justice on which the God of righteousness makes His voice heard. His witnesses are flesh and blood and the outraged conscience of a whole world which, even if it lieth in the wicked one, yet has a sense of right and gives unimpeachable judgment on flagrant wrong. Our own generation has given evidence of a moral consciousness which would be impossible were current theological accounts of human nature the final estimate of its quality.

My last word on these trends is one of doubt and question as to the possibility of getting a hearing for the Gospel in such an age as this by wholesale vilification of man, unrelieved pessimism as to the future of humanity, and the portrayal of a God without understanding of or sympathy with His creatures, writhing under the stress of tremendous ordeals and crushing burdens. Surely He whom we acclaim as Leader, who Himself on the Cross bore the weight of man's sin and sorrow in the struggle to redeem them, will not look without pity on the millions plunged in agony and want by the sins of others? Surely we may believe they are on His great heart of love borne into the presence of His Father, however weak and unworthy as a whole they may be?

The unrelieved pessimism as to the future of the world of which I have already spoken has gained in intensity from the work of another outstanding thinker of our time—Niebuhr. A strong, virile, swashbuckling personality who has defied every accepted canon of procedure in his brilliant career, he is at once an enigma and an obsession to all students of ethics in our time. Of German origin, he belongs to the ignoble fraternity of those who enter theological Colleges and think to find them out for what they are, institutions that have had their day, tied up to tradition and routine, their courses including everything that is least necessary for the training of ministers, omitting almost everything that has any kind of relevance to "the Gods of the things that are," in their absorption with the abstractions of theology. Having the courage of his convictions, Niebuhr soon left College and set out upon the ministry with such equipment as he had picked up outside theological seminaries. Like many another of the untrained, he made good; and his ministry in Detroit was not only successful, but distinguished. To-day, he is the leading light of a famous Theological College in New York; paradoxically enough the leader also of the Christian Socialist Movement in America. Very much to the Left in politics, he is very much to the right in theology. Those who are familiar with his works think of him as a dynamic personality, a brilliant writer, a devastating critic, a provoking and rousing thinker. His delight

is to hammer the orthodox the one moment, then with equal zest turn and rend the liberal-minded. His positive message is forgiveness; but with characteristic whimsicality he would have us believe that the chief Christian affirmation is the resurrection of the body. The main drift of his ethical teaching is pessimistic in its implications. For with almost wearisome reiteration he denies Christian men the satisfaction of any progress, far less victory, in their attack on the moral and social evils of the age, or their positive schemes for the welfare of humanity. His great idea is that the Christian ideal is always in the heavens out of our reach. When in some effort for the good of others we feel that we have to some extent brought the ideal to earth, we are, according to him, of all men most to be pitied. All that has happened is that we have given shape to some idea of our own. All our philanthropies, all our social enterprises, even the missionary movements in our churches, do not bring us any nearer the attainment of the Christian ideal; and the very sense of having attained anything is evidence that we have attained nothing. Frankly, Niebuhr does not seem to believe that the redemption of society can be brought about by the Church. He seems to trust more to the power of law and the advancing sense of right as effectual agents in this sphere. He seems to find, however, his hope for humanity in the permeation of society by the spirit of love and forgiveness. There we would agree with him; but if that love can find no expression in institutions, if our every effort to give it outward form is futile—only the gratifying of our desire for self-expression—his teaching is not very helpful. It may be that his function is that of a critic who rides roughshod over all men's plans and programmes in the determination to probe to the heart their vanity and folly. There is no doubt that his sharp, derisive criticism of honest efforts to Christianise our institutions is depressing and destructive. At the same time, his elevation of the Christian ideal to such unattainable heights gives a dimension to our religion that evokes humility on the one hand and reverence on the other.

It remains to be seen whether the dogmatic, cocksure, assertive pose will impress the mind of an age so caught up in all manner of tangles as ours. The modern man will not be dragooned into intellectual any more than physical submission. Even an apostle of Paul's standing and inspiration sought to *persuade* men. Some of the methods of our dogmatists are likely to be short-lived. Their habit of scouring Europe for orphans of the storm who will be our theological leaders, their weakness for adopting neurotics like Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky in support of their positions, seem to point to a certain morbidness of outlook, which is not characteristic of the New Testament. A theology of crisis

is in place in an epoch of crisis; but crises pass; so may theologies of crisis.

The influence of these movements is found in strange places. The B.B.C., under its present Religious Director, is ultra-dogmatic in its theological standpoint. Anthony Deane, once a very popular broadcaster, tells us in his *Times Remembered*, of the summary manner in which he was dropped by that institution with the advent of the present regime. But other voices are heard over the air that do not radiate so settled a certitude. Julian Huxley, in his latest book, reveals that the much-boasted conversion of scientific opinion to belief in the spiritual may not be so general nor so permanent as some people think. Joad and C. S. Lewis are still struggling with the problem of suffering from scratch as though they were "the first that ever burst into that silent sea." These men have a very large congregation, indicating that there are many, and among them people of character and knowledge, who will not be satisfied with an unreasoning dogmatism. The day will come, also, when the constant harping on man's inability to do or think anything right will bring its inevitable reactions. Along with that the exaggerated decrying of Humanism—under which designation it is deemed just to include almost any flowering of the human spirit—may bring its penalty in the final disassociation of intellect from revealed religion. In that connection the most recent writer on Humanism—L. H. Hough, in his book *The Meaning of Human Experience*—says: "It has always been too easy for a man to say, 'I belong to Athens; I do not belong to Jerusalem,' or to say, 'I belong to Jerusalem; I do not belong to Athens.' In a sense, at its best, Athens represents man marching Godward. And . . . Jerusalem represents God marching manward. But in a very profound sense the two cities belong together. And if it is true that Athens will come upon frustration at last unless it receives the insights of Jerusalem, we must also be honest enough to say that Jerusalem with all its glory needs something which only Athens can give."

There is a worthy dogmatism enshrined in the New Testament. It can be expressed in three words—"The Incomparable Christ." In his latest work, published after his death, Denney gave as his final creed: I believe in God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Here is the real bedrock—that Rock which is Christ.

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