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God at work in the World : Old Liberal and New Secular Theology

"IT IS for the Church to discern God's activity in the secular world, to co-operate with that activity and to point to Christ's presence in it." This¹ is the emphasis of much of the recent theology of mission. In the 1960's a style of theology emerged in which the work of the Church is grounded in the activity of God Himself, whose activity is to be located in secular history and social change. Particularly important here have been the studies on mission promoted by the World Council of Churches², and the work of theologians (especially Dutch and American) who have sought to relate theories of social change to the Biblical faith in God's action in history.

Among the writers responsible for bringing this style before the English-speaking churches, Colin Williams and Harvey Cox are two of the most well-known. Williams writes:

" . . . The witnessing task of the Church requires it 'to watch for the signs of Christ's presence in the communities of the world' and to be ready to join with Christ as he carries on his redeeming work within the events of contemporary history . . . Christians are those who, believing in Christ's Lordship over the world, watch for the signs of his redeeming work wherever they appear, and stand ready to join him where he is at work bringing forth the signs of the New Humanity".³

Harvey Cox puts it thus:

"The starting point for any theology of the Church today must be a theology of social change. The Church is first of all a responding community, a people whose task it is to discern the action of God in the world and to join in His work."⁴

Some Christians, at least, are finding this style an attractive way of linking God, the contemporary world, and the role of the Church. It offers a way, so to speak, of reading the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. It could become a new way for the "ordinary" Christian to speak about mission, since it can be free of both academic terms and traditional, pious phraseology. It can be refreshingly concrete. For example:

"If . . . Christians believe that God is busy reducing the gap in living standards between the Western world and those of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, then you go and share in the same piece of work and call it mission.

"If you believe God is busy setting free an Indian village from its bondage to animism, then you go and help in the deliverance and call it mission."⁵

Now, although this style is a recent feature, Nonconformist readers who are aware of their heritage may well imagine that in it they detect echoes from the past. This is not the first time this century that theologians have sought to discern the activity of God in the world about them, and to call their fellow believers to work with Him there. In the decade or so before the First World War, a similar note was evident in the preaching of the English Free Churches. John Clifford (1836-1923), leader and embodiment of the Nonconformist Conscience in the Edwardian period, could speak thus:

“God Himself is at work for the redemption and regeneration of mankind . . . burning up the evils and wrongs in man, and flooding him with the energies of righteousness and peace”.⁶

This work was to be seen in current world history:

“For God, who brought the peoples of the world into close touch with each other, by many ways and from far-sundered points, when He was about to become flesh and dwell among us for our redemption, is repeating the same unifying work on the widest scale, and by many multiform agencies at this hour . . . Rome made the world one so that Christ might win it . . . See you not the same signs at the door today?”⁷

Further, man was called to share in God’s redemptive work:

“We are taking part in making all things new . . . We have to prepare for the production of the new man, the man who attains to the fulness of the stature of manhood in Christ Jesus”.⁸

Another Baptist, T. E. Ruth, of Liverpool, could say:

“Christianity is Christ at work among men, advancing civilisation in history, holiness in human hearts, wholeness in human life . . . God is calling you, God is calling this Church, and all the Churches in England, to wholeness, calling us all to share in Christ’s ministry to the soul of humanity . . . All the world is calling”.⁹

F. B. Meyer (1847-1929) — after Clifford, perhaps the most celebrated Baptist of the day — spoke in similar vein:

“Yes, Christ is *Immanent* in the life of the world as well as Transcendent over it . . .

“He is moving towards an end which He has had in view from all eternity, and is bearing with Him the destinies of men and nations . . . But since the world discerns Him not, it is for the Church to read His handwriting on the wall, to bear witness to Christian ideals, to aid Him in the work of reconstruction, and to secure, . . . freedom instead of slavery, peace instead of battalions and warships, self-sacrifice instead of self-interest, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven”.¹⁰

This style was not, of course, a monopoly of Baptists nor of the Free Churches generally. The hymn “God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year”, which is probably the most well-known

devotional expression of this theology, was in fact written by an Anglican, A. C. Ainger (1841-1919). But for Free Churchmen this theology had a special appeal, for it provided the link between religious faith and social aspirations. In the Edwardian period, Nonconformists were still fighting for what they saw as the full recognition of their rights, and were strongly identified with the Liberal cause in politics. Nonconformity, with its emphasis on individual commitment and religious freedom, had a stake in the growth of a liberal democracy. It is not surprising, then, that in the kind of social change taking place in Britain around the turn of the century, they should see signs of the advancing Kingdom of God. They had to share in the struggle to bring this change about. Not only did they advocate disestablishment, "non-sectarian" education, and temperance legislation, but they also supported the whole range of causes on the Liberal Party platform, including reform of the House of Lords, the land question, the People's Budget, and the continually reiterated plea for reduction in military expenditure.

There is an apparent affinity between the examples of Free Church liberal theology we have quoted, and the contemporary "secular"¹¹ theologians of mission cited earlier. Both types speak of God, or Christ, as being active in the world, and both see the Church's role as that of discerning the divine activity and joining in it. It is interesting to compare the styles more closely.

This means, first, that we should try to avoid the rather condescending attitude to the old liberal¹² theology, which those of us who never lived before 1914 can too easily assume. Richard Niebuhr's dictum on American liberal theology is often quoted: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross".¹³ But such criticisms, however well-aimed, must not be allowed to caricature the accused out of all recognition. A balanced view is necessary. In this paper, we shall ask how some of the familiar criticisms of liberalism do in fact apply to the Edwardian nonconformists we have cited.

We shall then be in a position to ask to what extent the secular theologians, who seem to be saying similar things to the liberals, invite or avoid the same charges as are levelled against their predecessors of sixty years ago. This is an important question, because one of the few things that modern theologians appear to have agreed about is that the liberal theology of the pre-1914 era was decisively inadequate. It could not cope with the harsh realities of the later twentieth century. Its interpretation of the human condition and the ways of God with men were proved to be much too facile. But, it may be asked, is not the same approach creeping back into the theology and preaching of the Church in the form of secular theology? Is not this just the old liberalism in modern sociological guise? And will it not prove wanting, just as liberalism did? Some comparison is called for, and an attempt will be made here, using the examples from both periods quoted previously.

First, it may be said that in both the old liberal and the new secular theology we have a basically immanentist concept of God, "at work in the world". The danger here, it may be alleged, is that of losing the distinctiveness of God over against the world. If we locate God in the tide of secular events, are we not on the way to losing Him altogether in a vague, monistic idea of the cosmic process, in which human and divine, natural and supernatural, are merely labels for different aspects of the same reality? Surely God transcends the world.

It is certainly true that at the turn of the century English liberal theology was strongly immanentist in tone. Following in the wake of idealist philosophy, evolutionary theory and current notions of "progress", theologians were disposed to seeking God's hand in the development of the cosmos and of the human race in particular. For Anglo-Catholics thinkers such as Charles Gore, God's immanence was consummated in the incarnation. In liberal Nonconformist thought, immanence was less well-grounded in specifically Christian insights. Silvester Horne stated that in the late Victorian era "an even greater influence on religious thought than theologians and preachers were able to exercise was exerted by Robert Browning."¹⁴

In this connection, R. J. Campbell, minister of the City Temple 1903-15, is usually regarded as the most important Free Church figure. From early in 1907, controversy raged following the publication of his views on the relationship between the human and divine:

"Jesus was and is divine, but so are we; His mission was to make us realise our divinity; that is our oneness with God".¹⁵

Campbell carried immanence to its extreme limit — a monistic, spiritualistic view of reality enclosing humanity and divinity in one. The title of his book *The New Theology* (1907)¹⁶ became the name of the movement he led. But the movement, though exciting widespread publicity, was in fact confined to a fairly small group of Congregationalist ministers.¹⁷ In so far as Campbell and others took the immanentist trend to its absolute limit, they deserve special attention in the intellectual landscape of the period. But their views were far from typical, and many who sympathised with an immanentist approach were shocked at the monistic tone of the "New Theology".

This is sometimes overlooked when reviewing the thought of the Free Churches in the Edwardian period. Thus Horton Davies¹⁸ includes under the title "The New Theology" (sometimes without capital letters) *all* theology of the period which stressed the immanence of God and concern with social issues. Among others, John Clifford is classed by Davies as a leading protagonist of the "new theology". This is somewhat misleading. It is true that on occasion Clifford's rhetoric showed some affinity with Campbell's views. For example:

"There are moments when human nature seems to have lost its capacity for indignation against wrong. But it is there . . . It is a mark of the *divinity that sleeps in us*; when roused it arises in fury and sweeps everything before it".¹⁹

But Clifford never approached the monism which was the distinctive mark of the "New Theology". He was aware of the need to preserve the transcendence of God as well as His immanence. When the controversy broke in 1907 Clifford — like most Free Church leaders — was active in repudiating Campbell's views. He found the New Theology crucially deficient on these grounds: that it ultimately effaced all moral differences of right and wrong; that it merged the human and divine to the exclusion of human selfhood; that it denied human freedom; that it weakened human moral responsibility; and that this theology lost God in His universe as a personal and loving Father.²⁰

The insight into the immanence of God was a great gain, said Clifford. But, he went on, "It is not without its perils. Our peril is our loss of the great truth that whilst God is in all and through all, He is also over all, and above all".²¹ That Clifford, who fervently preached a God "at work in the world", felt it important to say this is a sign that the liberal outlook was not wholly one-sided. God was still the just and merciful Father who forgave sins.²²

Still more true is this of F. B. Meyer, who was in fact pietistic and evangelical in outlook, though concerned, as Clifford was, with the social aspects of nonconformity.²³ In calling his fellow-Baptists to acknowledge the immanence of Christ in the world, he apparently thought that this was receiving insufficient stress at the time.²⁴

Therefore, while liberal theology in the early years of this century tended towards an immanent view of God, this did not mean the complete loss of a sense of the transcendent. The sharp reaction to the "New Theology" by such thinkers as John Clifford as well as by such as P. T. Forsyth, was significant. To speak of God active in the world did not mean that His distinctiveness was forgotten.

As for the secular theologians we are considering, here again the line between God and the world is not lost. In fact we should expect to find it considerably sharpened, since much of this thinking has its roots in Barthian and existential theology. It looks to the revelatory insights of the Bible rather than to a philosophical world-view. While God is to be sought only in the *world*, He is still *God* and not part of a "world process", or another name for it. He does not lose any of His "Godness" by being in the midst of life and history. He transcends us not by being far from us, but by the "otherness" of His grace which He discloses by being in our midst in Jesus Christ. This "secular transcendence" is based on a thorough-going Christocentric emphasis.

Colin Williams writes:

"The secular event of the life of Jesus is one which discloses in history the meaning and goal of history. Jesus therefore transcends history because he shows us the end of history".

Jesus transcends us by his "grace":²⁵

"His transcendence for me means that unlike any other neighbour, he is the one who is fully and unreservedly for me, and who

is able to draw me into his movement towards the goal he has appointed for us all"²⁶

Christ meets us, too, as Pantocrator, the one who transcends death by his resurrection:

"A life is revealed to us in this event which has greater strength and meaning because it is a life that has already 'defeated' death."²⁷

The "otherness" of God is thus focussed in the life of Christ and his significance for men. In history, we find someone who discloses the meaning of all history.

Harvey Cox, also, makes much of the transcendence of God. Commenting on the significance of Barth's insight, Cox writes: "Only when God and man have been fully differentiated from each other can God come near to man without limiting and oppressing him."²⁸ It is precisely God's transcendence over the world which enables Him to liberate the world in the process of secularisation. Wordly systems of life and thought are thereby "desacralized" and the potential of human life more fully realised in this God-given freedom.²⁹

Whereas liberal theologians were mainly concerned with the immanence of God, while not forgetting His transcendence, the secular theologians have been moving in a different direction. *Starting* with the distinctiveness of God, they have asked: How is a transcendent God related to the world? The link is provided in Jesus Christ. With the attention focused on him, both the "otherness" of God and His involvement in the world are stressed.

The second question to be asked of both liberal and secular theology concerns their apparent confidence in history. Do not both styles of theology show unfounded faith in human progress? Is it not a fact that men are too eager to speak of "God being at work in the world", as a way of glossing over the darker realities of sin, evil and suffering which are only too prevalent in the world? Was it not precisely the failure of liberalism that its naive hopes of the kingdom of God were progressively shattered from 1914 onwards? And is not a similar fate in store for a secular theology which bids us hail "progressive" movements and technological advance as signs of the kingdom?

Optimism was certainly a key-note of liberal Free Churchmen in the Edwardian period — above all of John Clifford. Each New Year at Westbourne Park Chapel he gave a lecture to young people, reviewing the past year's developments and anticipating the next.³⁰ Advances in science and engineering, social and political changes at home and abroad, progress made by the churches themselves — all were scanned and interpreted as "a line or two of the pages of that ever-growing Bible of the human race that, though 'slowly writ' is surely and clearly disclosing the mind of the living God to the sons of men".³¹ In 1906 he said:

"The life of man everywhere is widening and heightening. We are moving towards spiritual heights which, as yet, appear only

dimly through the mists of noble desires. Materialism is being beaten by the forces of idealism. At last man is coming to his own."³²

This almost apocalyptic feeling of standing at the turning point of the ages as shared by F. B. Meyer:

"Human society is passing through one of the greatest revolutions of history. Probably it is no hyperbole to say that our day is historic with the greatest destinies of any since the Cross of the Son of Man".³³

As signs of the new age, Meyer saw the ways in which the 'Ideals of the people' were being implemented, such as the demands for good housing and education. In *The Creed of Creeds* he compiled a list of items supporting the optimistic view. He included the lessening use of torture, greater humanitarianism in war, society's greater care for girl and child life, and efforts to improve international understanding.³⁴

Human progress was almost axiomatic for liberal Free Churchmen, particularly as they had been making numerical and social advances for many years. The tide seemed to be with them. Progress and Christianity — especially nonconformist Christianity — were allies. Indeed E. T. Ruth stated that "Christianity is the only religion that can live with progress".³⁵

Such optimism looks unreal, surveyed through the actual experience of the later twentieth century. But the liberals' confidence in progress did not completely blind them to the uncomfortable realities of the world. Suffering, sin and evil were not ignored. Clifford could write:

"Evil plays so large a part in our life that we cannot find room in it for God. Deluges come so often, some partial, sweeping away the beautiful edifices we have reared at the cost of thought and prayer and pain; others universal, pouring out their destructive energies over every field we have . . . so that our faith in the righteous order is strained to utter breakdown, and we collapse as the wicked taunt us saying, 'Where is now thy God?'"³⁶

This is a useful reminder that in the apparent sunshine of Edwardian England, with nonconformity at its zenith, faith could still be strained to breaking-point. Sensitive minds were aware that all was not light. The reality of God's good purpose was sometimes a matter for faith rather than bland assumption. Faith had then to rest in God Himself, not in any innate upward tendency in the scheme of things. Clifford's approach to the problem of suffering was to see it as part of God's redemptive purpose for His creation. This was the hope given to those who looked, to God for the meaning of life:

"If He, the Lord of this pain-filled, care-laden, sin-fettered life, where misery and sin and shame abound, and the struggle is so keen, and the strife so dinning — if He is glad and blessed amid all this, it is because He sees and knows all, and I, therefore, may take heart, and be assured that the pains of creation prophesy a freer and fuller life, and the suffering of the present

will work out a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory”³⁷

Meyer, too, grappled with the “dark” side of experience. He recognised the reality of “the dark spirit of evil which contemplates the fairest designs of the Creator”.³⁸ Like Clifford, he saw evil as being eventually overcome, but was less inclined than Clifford to see pain as something that could be part of God’s design:

“The intrusion of evil was not necessary to the achievement of His beneficent design, but . . . God’s design has been consummated notwithstanding its malign and insidious opposition. He will overcome the evil by greater and yet greater good”.³⁹

But however they dealt with it, both these preachers, who fervently believed that the purposes of God were being realised in their world, were aware of the reality of evil in its various forms. They were also aware of man’s need for redemption from sin.⁴⁰ These elements may not always have been uppermost, but they were there. Indeed, it would have been inconceivable for any relevant preaching and theology of the time not to reflect the “other” side of experience. Apart from the tragedy which always accompanies the personal life of man, it is likely that the more alert thinkers were beginning to realise that other uncomfortable questions would soon be requiring answers. The Edwardian era is often romantically caricatured as a time of sunny contentment for all. But it was in fact a time of increasing social and political tension in England. Industrial unrest, the rise of Parliamentary socialism, the frustrations put in the way of the Liberals’ attempts at reform, the looming menace of the Irish Question — these and other issues caused liberal-minded people increasing concern as the years rolled towards 1914. For the leaders of non-conformity there was the added anxiety about the “arrested progress” of the churches themselves after about 1906.⁴¹

We should not be surprised, then, at signs of feverish rather than eirenic optimism. Meyer, in particular, was liable to periods of pessimism about the state of the country and the future of the churches. Liberalism was beginning to feel the strain even before the shock of the First World War. But it is still true that this theology was cast in a basically optimistic mould. Silvester Horne’s hymn “Sing we the King who is coming to reign” described a vision which many hoped to see fulfilled in their day.

In secular theology, there appears at first sight to be a rebirth of the liberal faith in progress. In some quarters the similarity is very close. Here is an extract from *Partners in Learning 1971-72 (Adult)*:

“It is through our belief that God is acting in the world that hope is given to us.

To what shall we turn? The work of psychiatrists enables us to treat mental illness with increasing effectiveness; gradually a greater humanity is coming into the way in which offenders are treated . . . The belief that every man and woman is of equal status and worthy of equal opportunity is almost universally

accepted. The means to end hunger, if not the will, are known to man."⁴²

Medical advance, more human conditions of work, the spread and influence of Christianity in the world are also listed by the writer. Except for the actual cases cited, this could almost be Meyer or Clifford listing the achievements of their age as signs of the activity of God. But though the opening sentence of the above derives something from the style of such writers as Colin Williams and Harvey Cox, the passage as a whole does not do justice to their insights into the relation between social change and the activity of God.

If the leading secular theologians are studied thoroughly, it is clear that they are not simply identifying "change for the better" with the coming of the kingdom (as the liberals tended to do). Nor are they saying that a utopian secular city is their vision of the kingdom completed. For these writers, the relation between worldly event and divine action is more subtle. Eschatology has been taken more seriously. Historical change is seen to be very ambiguous — indeed, perilous. Christ's presence in history does not mean assured progress. Colin Williams states:

"Yes, Christ is there — in the revolution of our time — offering new life, new hope, new humanity . . . And that means that there is also the possibility of misusing this gracious gift, by grasping the freedom he is offering and turning the opportunity into demonic directions, thus coming under the sway of principalities and powers".⁴³

Williams takes the world-wide struggle for racial equality as an instance of the "revolution" in which Christ is to be seen at work. This "sign of the time" is one way in which God is offering man the possibility of a fuller and more truly human life. He continues

"Of course the emphasis . . . must be on 'possibility'. When we speak of these 'secular conversions' we must not imagine that we can make a tensionless translation of this occurrence into the language of redemption. In other words, we must not be tempted into thinking that we can see in these historical events the direct fulfilment of Christ's redeeming purpose . . . We see the possibility here of fuller participation in the life of the New Humanity . . . But we can see too the possibility of an even more de-humanized life coming after these revolutions".⁴⁴

To say that Christ is in the world is not therefore a way of expressing confidence in earthly power and progressive movements. It is the recognition that in social change man is called to *decision* by God. There is no parallel here with the old sort of "belief in progress". The possibilities of demonic misuse of the new gifts and freedom are terrifyingly real. There is judgment as well as promise.

It is Harvey Cox who is most likely to be charged with proclaiming a secular utopianism in the name of the kingdom of God. Cox is certainly anxious to present God as active in social change, and particularly in the emergence of the secular city. But he is very careful

in linking the growth of "technopolis" with the kingdom of God on earth. He draws parallels between the two. Thus both the kingdom and the secular city involve divine and human action together (of the ministry of Jesus). Just as the kingdom demands "repentance", so the secular city demands from man a radical break with his past traditions. Just as the kingdom is both an eschatological reality beyond history *and* one which is now being realised, so the secular city can be seen as the future situation invading the present order.⁴⁵

In the Bible, says Cox, man repeatedly encounters God as One who beckons him to come from where he is to a different place.⁴⁶ So man can experience this in the emergence of the secular city. Participation in creating the secular city may even be the way in which man now shares in the life of the kingdom. However, it is not in the secular situation itself that hope lies, but in the presence of *God* in that situation. God is "able to be present in a situation without actually identifying with it, and He is always present to liberate man."⁴⁷

Such secular theologians have not therefore replaced faith in God by a naive belief in "progress", whether moral or technological. They are committed to the God who through the crisis of secularization and the struggle for human values is calling man to repentance and new life. Far from being overlooked, the reality and depths of sinfulness are fully reckoned with as factors in man's response. This can of course escape the notice of their would-be supporters as well as their critics, and a diluted version of this theology might encourage a new utopianism.

A third, and very serious, charge to be levelled at "God-at-work-in-the-world" theology is that it can be a subtle way of deifying our own interests, whether social, political or ecclesiastical. We sanctify our vested interest by calling it God's cause. We welcome the fulfilment of *our* ideal as the advent of the kingdom. What we call "God's purpose" is thus simply the projection of our own wishes, prejudices and social ideals which to a large extent are sociologically conditioned.

The theology of liberal nonconformity is thereby charged with having been the baptism of middle-class patriotic and liberal-humanitarian English attitudes in religious fervour. If so, then it was inevitable that even the Nonconformist devotion to "world peace" and its sympathies with pacifism would be swallowed up in the nationalistic heat of the First World War.

Similarly, it could be alleged, secular theology is simply talking in its own jargon of what idealistic, intellectual Christians would like the world to become, to provide a more secure home for themselves. Social and political activity which appears to work towards this ideal — even by violent means if necessary — is interpreted as "God at work". "We shall overcome . . . God is on our side . . . etc."

All theology faces the charge of being a projection of human attitudes and aspirations on to the figure of "God." But it is inherently

much easier to criticize a theology which is committed to secular action. One has only to find which social and political causes are supported by the theologians, and it would be difficult *not* to find some self-interest there. In other types of theology the evidence is much less tangible.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is relatively easy for us to pick out the ways in which, early this century, Nonconformity was ideologically shaped by social pressures. S. Mayor has described how Free Churchmen in the Edwardian period saw the social issues of the day largely from within their own middle-class perspective, but nevertheless made a real contribution to the rise of democratic socialism.⁴⁸ Their attitudes to imperialism can also be examined in this way.

At the turn of the century, most Englishmen took it for granted that a quarter of the earth's surface was under the British flag, and assumed that this was as it should be. Nonconformists did not differ markedly from the rest on this. They were proud of the Empire, and pointed to the part played by Christian missions in spreading moral and spiritual influence in what might otherwise have been purely commercial and military aggrandisement. In a *Baptist Times* editorial on "Imperialism" in 1900, the writer recognized the part played by the sword in the growth of the Empire, but saw the leavening influence of Christianity as being the true strength of imperialism.⁴⁹

Nonconformists were imperialists, but idealistically so. During the Boer War, many deeply regretted that recourse was made to arms. Some even held that the annexation of the Boer States was wrong, whether by peaceful or military means. John Clifford, although he used the full force of his oratory against the fighting and cruelty, considered that British rule was nevertheless in the best interests of all in Southern Africa. This was also the line taken by F. B. Meyer and others who signed the Free Church Manifesto on the war in 1901.⁵⁰

Clifford distinguished between "true" and "false" imperialism. The former was informed by spiritual and moral principles, the latter by purely selfish and material motives.⁵¹ Moreover, the British people had been entrusted with a mission by God:

"I believe in the mission of the British people to help in delivering the world from the curse of war, and to promote the settlement of all disputes by arbitration and not by the sword.

"I believe in the mission of the British people to promote humanity amongst all the peoples of the earth, to secure real brotherhood between race and race, nation and nation, people and people . . ."⁵²

Clifford believed that "Christians ought to be the best patriots".⁵³ Down the centuries, God had been teaching Britain through her own history "to become, along with others, teachers, pioneers, and evangelists in chief, of men".⁵⁴

F. B. Meyer, too, believed that Britain had a specially exalted

role in the world. Reporting on an address he gave to young people in 1906, the *Baptist Times* said:

“They must believe that England occupied the place of Israel of old. Woe to the man that wrote the comic history of England. Only he who sees takes off his shoes. Had the Jews their great singers? They in England had their great singers too; and Mr. Meyer went on to illustrate similarities, and urged that they had been born in England through which the nations of the world were being taught God’s laws”.⁵⁵

It can be argued that this idea of the chosen people with a special mission is a prime case of “ideological projection”. The rest of the world is being taught, through Britain, how God wants them to live. This, one suspects, is a subtle way of saying that Britain thinks the rest of the world ought to live as she thinks fit. Christians in Germany were saying corresponding things about their own culture. In the First World War, many on both sides saw their cause as God’s.

If it is the prophetic calling of Christianity to question the whole basis of the national culture of the time, then liberal Nonconformity failed. It became part of the imperial attitude itself. But it should be remembered that in a “Mafeking” atmosphere, to criticize the policies of the Empire as Clifford and others did must have seemed astonishingly radical and even subversive. (Westbourne Park Chapel was threatened by mobs several times during the Boer War.) The Empire was justified, but its policies were not above the moral law. Indeed, Clifford believed (see above) that its true end was served in helping to create international and interracial harmony.

Today’s secular theologians have remembered that liberalism was suspect here, and are aware of man’s “inveterate tendency to stamp his own self-interest with the seal of God’s approval”, as Colin Williams puts it.⁵⁶ They are conscious of Barth peering over their shoulders as they write. They see the danger as two-fold — on the one hand, identifying their cause with God’s *and*, at the other extreme, so detaching God’s activity from the struggles of the world that He becomes altogether irrelevant. For them the Christians criterion for identifying God’s activity is not arbitrary, but based on faith in the revelation of Jesus Christ. The secular theologian therefore believes that, whatever the risk, he must return to the world and try to discern the footprints of Christ in the issues of the day, Harvey Cox writes:

“The key to locating the action is, of course, that the same God who was there yesterday is present in the action today. To locate today’s action we need to know the lead actor, and this actor has disclosed himself in the life of Jesus himself”.⁵⁷

For Cox, Exodus and Easter form the basis for theology. The same God who worked in these events is to be seen now, liberating people from cultural and economic activity.⁵⁸ Williams is similarly Christocentric, and perhaps more aware than Cox of the dangers of a “theology of glory” in locating God in social change. Christ may

still have to effect his liberation through suffering, which the Church will be called upon to share.⁵⁹

Secular theology thus works with a Christological criterion for identifying the activity of God in the world. Social change which discloses the possibility of deeper humanity after the pattern of Jesus Christ, is the situation where God is at work. Particularly, this applies to the removal of the barriers between peoples and races, and the ending of systems of exploitation. This should mean, theoretically, that secular theology is much less prone than liberalism to becoming the projection of a social group interest. For if the sign of God's activity is the shaking of the barriers between communities, this must affect the relation between Church and world. The Church is not above the world, but serving the world and identified with it in its need. It could mean that Christians are called to make the cause of groups *other* than themselves their very own. There is of course the danger of Christians seeking secular causes in a revolutionary situation in order that in the end the Church should be on the "winning side". As the report *Violence in Southern Africa* points out, to jump on secular band-wagons in this way would be yet another display of corrupt interest for the sake of self-preservation.⁶⁰

We have considered three ways in which liberalism was found to be theologically suspect, and seen how some secular theologians deal with the parallel problems today. These are doubtless other questions to ask from a theological angle. But there is one fundamental question to ask both of the old liberalism and the secular theology of today. It is a question so simple that it may not be thought worth bothering with. But on it hangs the whole of any theology of "God at work in the world". It is: Do we know *what* is happening in the world? We can agree that we have to discern the activity of God in current change. But this means we have to see just what the activity is, in which God is supposed to be present. This may not be so obvious as at first appears.

This can be well illustrated in the case of the liberal Nonconformists and their attitudes to the international situation of the day. Free Church leaders were deeply concerned with the cause of peace during the period 1900-14. From 1906 onwards, continual protests were made about the annually increasing arms budget, as Britain strived to keep her naval superiority over Germany. The Churches' peace movement, developing from exchange visits of British and German pastors in 1908-09, owed much to Free Church support. This concern reflected anxiety about the competition between Britain and Germany, and there were real fears of catastrophe which were, of course, realised in 1914. But this anxiety was focussed mainly on the obvious symptom of the competition — the naval race itself. The underlying reasons for suspicion were not probed — indeed it was assumed by many that there was no need for suspicion at all. Inter-

national relations in themselves were thought to be stable, and the prospects brightening.

Of the optimists, as might be expected, none was more sanguine than John Clifford:

"No nation lives to itself now, they reciprocate, supplement and complement one another. Internationalism is born, and will not die. Man finds that he cannot be content to be a patriot; his humanity is as universal as it is real . . . There is an international consciousness which is the beginning of that better understanding of mutual interests, and truer love of man for man, that will in time alter the face of the world."⁶¹

As examples of this "international consciousness", Clifford cites international Labour Organizations, commerce conferences, socialism, exchange visits of journalists, municipal authorities and Church leaders. But interestingly, he also includes "alliances", and on several occasions he specified which one he particularly had in mind:

"A slow, peaceful evolution is being effected in the interests of amity, goodwill and brotherhood. The *entente cordiale* with France is an accomplished fact, and the prophecy of a coming advance in which an *entente cordiale* shall bind not two nationalities only, but the whole human family in one."⁶²

Clifford thus misread the political significance of the *entente*. Evidently his eagerness to detect the hand of God in events of the day led him to a superficial interpretation of the secular meaning of the events themselves. The alliance was seen as an agreement for friendship's sake. The uncomfortable possibility, that it meant a stage in the alignment of one part of Europe against another part, was skated over. Here is a sign of where one of the real weaknesses of liberalism lay: not that it paid too much attention to the world, but that it did not pay enough.

If we are to indulge in the suspect practice of drawing lessons from the past, perhaps it is here that the warning note is sounded to today's secular theology. If our theology claims to take the world seriously, *then it must do precisely that*. We must look at the world as it is. The uncomfortable complexities must be faced, and not short-circuited by a superficial moralising of the situation (let alone theologising). God may indeed be at work in the world. It may indeed be the job of Christians to discern His activity and to join Him in it. But the Christian's faith and his moral sense do not by themselves give some sort of magic insight into what is happening. Like everyone else we have to do our homework on the facts, however tedious; whether in Southern Africa, Northern Ireland, or the industrial estate down the road. It could be the case that the more we know about a situation the less eager we shall be to moralise, let alone theologise. In discussing international relationships, Alan R. Booth points out that to moralise about a situation of conflict rarely contributes towards its solution, and in fact can make it still more intractable. "It becomes in a curious way, the task of the man of

moral earnestness to deflate the moral pretensions of nations as a contribution to peace".⁶³ The same could apply in many contexts.

If the world is indeed going to write the agenda, and God's activity is going to be traced there, it may be a much more demanding task than was bargained for. Slick, relevant sermons will not write themselves. Exciting programmes for mission will not be produced at the drop of a hat. The would-be secular missionary will be compelled to listen and learn, probe and sift. There will be desperate prayer for the gift of interpreting the signs. When he acts, he will not be cocksure that everything he does is a part of what God is doing. This need not depress such Christians too much. God's true prophets and saints have always been marked by their attitude of reverence, even to the extent of scarcely daring to take His name on their lips. It might be claimed that the caution and humility to which the truly secular style drives the Christian, could be the type of reverence for today.

We recognise the shortcomings of the theology of our liberal forbears, as future generations will recognise ours. But however naïve many of their hopes may now seem to us, they were at least aware that the twentieth century Church would have to take seriously what was happening in the world where God was active. They were pioneers. Later theologians have learnt from the weaknesses of liberalism, and, one trusts, its positive aspects too. The challenge it took up — of relating God, the contemporary world and the Church — is still with us.

NOTES

¹ Emilio Castro, in *Christians in a New World* (ed. D. L. Edwards), London, 1966, p. 12.

² The long-range study on "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation" was initiated after the 1961 New Delhi Assembly of the W.C.C.

³ Colin Williams, *What in the World?*, London, 1965, p. 30.

⁴ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, London, 1966, p. 105.

⁵ M. H. Taylor, *Baptist Times*, 27.3.69.

⁶ John Clifford, *The Gospel of Gladness*, Edinburgh, 1912, p. 203.

⁷ Presidential Address to European Baptist Congress, Berlin 1908, *Baptist Times* 4.9.08.

⁸ Clifford, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁹ *Baptist Times* 19.2.09.

¹⁰ Presidential Address to Baptist Union Spring Assembly 1906, *Baptist Times* 27.4.06.

¹¹ Many varieties of contemporary Christian thinking are labelled "secular theology". The term is used here to denote the particular style under discussion, exemplified by such writers as Williams and Cox.

¹² Like "secular"; so "liberal" covers a wide range of theology. For a survey of the varieties of "liberalism" at the turn of the century see B. M. G. Reardon, *Liberal Protestantism*, London, 1968.

¹³ H. R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, New York, 1937, p. 193.

- ¹⁴ C. Silvester Horne, *A Popular History of the Free Churches*, London 1903, p. 421.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in J. W. Grant, *Free Churchmanship in England 1870-1940*, London, 1955, p. 136.
- ¹⁶ R. J. Campbell, *The New Theology*, London, 1907.
- ¹⁷ Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in England 1662-1962*, p. 350-351.
- ¹⁸ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England. The Ecumenical Century 1900-65*, London, 1965, p. 124-134.
- ¹⁹ Clifford, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
- ²⁰ *Baptist Times* 8.2.07.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.2.07.
- ²² As, for example, many sermons in *The Gospel of Gladness* show.
- ²³ See F. B. Meyer, *The Creed of Creeds*, London, 1906, and W. Y. Fullerton, *F. B. Meyer*, London, 1929.
- ²⁴ *Baptist Times* 27.4.06.
- ²⁵ Colin Williams, *Faith in a Secular Age*, London, 1966, p. 79.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84-85.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- ²⁸ Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21-36.
- ³⁰ J. Marchant, *Dr. John Clifford*, London, 1924, p. 95-96.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- ³² *Baptist Times* 5.1.06.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 5.10.06.
- ³⁴ Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 137-140.
- ³⁵ *Baptist Times* 19.2.09.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.1.06.
- ³⁷ Clifford, *op. cit.*, p. 7-8.
- ³⁸ *Baptist Times* 26.1.11.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.1.11.
- ⁴⁰ As is clear from Clifford, *op. cit.*, and Meyer, *op. cit.*
- ⁴¹ See E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History*, London, 1958, p. 170, and Tudur Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 334.
- ⁴² *Partners in Learning: Adult (1971-72)*, London, 1971, p. 44.
- ⁴³ Williams, *What in the World?*, p. 41-42.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ⁴⁵ Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 110-111.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 261-2.
- ⁴⁸ S. Mayor, *The Churches and the Labour Movement*, London, 1967.
- ⁴⁹ *Baptist Times*, 13.4.00.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.8.01.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 20.7.00.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 22.12.05.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 19.1.06.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.1.06.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.10.11.
- ⁵⁶ Williams, *Faith in a Secular Age*, p. 91-92.
- ⁵⁷ Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- ⁵⁹ Williams, *Faith in a Secular Age*, p. 93.
- ⁶⁰ *Violence in Southern Africa: A Christian Assessment* London, 1970, p. 69.
- ⁶¹ *Baptist Times* 4.9.08.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 4.10.09.
- ⁶³ A. R. Booth, *Not Only Peace*, London, 1967, p. 45.