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A New 'Apologia'

DUNCAN B. FORRESTER

Since Newman wrote his *Apologia pro Vita sua* in 1864 the spirit and content of the debate between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism have changed unimaginably. Newman, for all his earnestness and penetration, sounds strangely irrelevant and old-fashioned in the 1960's. By and large, what worried him as a Protestant no longer worries Protestants, and what seemed to him as a Catholic to be the glories of Romanism no longer appear so to Roman Catholics themselves. He had stood on the bridge of Anglicanism and claimed to see there a notice, 'One-way traffic. No loitering'. A century later it seems that the river may be drying up, or at least changing its course. The Anglican bridge is no longer the only place of meeting, nor is the traffic all one way. The old view from the bridge is not now an adequate picture of the modern landscape.

Louis Bouyer's *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, recently published in paper back (Fontana, 1963. 8s. 6d.), may be the *Apologia* for our time. Bouyer, like Newman, was brought up a Protestant and was for some years in the Protestant ministry—in his case that of the Lutheran Church. No one could deny that he knows Protestantism from the inside or that he is a most capable theologian. His book seems, just below the surface, to be a deeply personal one, betraying a complicated love-hate relationship to his religious parentage which leads him at times into strangely contradictory attitudes. In some places his statements alternate between an almost nostalgic charity and an almost vindictive spleen. His fundamental claim is that he never rejected Protestantism, but that the study of Reformed theology in depth led him, and should lead others, into the Church of Rome. Protestantism as such is the road to Rome. The result is a book which cannot but be challenging to Protestants, but probably fortifies complacency among Bouyer's fellow Roman Catholics.

I. A NEARLY PERFECT SCHOOL OF CHRIST

The first half of Bouyer's work is thoroughly positive. He looks at Protestantism as a living religion and finds it good. The apparent bareness of Protestant liturgy hides, he suggests, a sublime and true conception of the nature of worship. Protestantism

is not 'bibliolatry' but a religion of the Word of a profoundly Biblical character, a rather austere version of at least certain types of Catholicism. It is not individualism unchecked and triumphant, as some critics have suggested, but it has a clear, if only partial, awareness of the Church. Protestantism does not idolize the Reformers, but 'Protestantism is Christian, not in its departure from the primitive and essential features of the Reformation, but in its adherence or return to them' (p. 31). Accordingly he can argue that the Lutheran doctrine of salvation is fully in agreement with the Catholic teaching and was a necessary and useful counterpoise to late medieval distortions. He rightly points to the *sola gratia* as the foundation of Protestant piety, and emphasizes the past and present fruitfulness of the concept in the lives of Protestants. The *sola gratia*, he says, is a mighty force for the restoration of apostolic Christianity (p. 78), but it is no reason for schism as it is fully accepted by the Roman Church. The Calvinist emphasis on the glory and sovereignty of God is also a positive one, and helps to avoid the tendency towards subjectivism and antinomianism which he finds in Luther. Calvin, he says, establishes firmly the link between faith and obedience. Even the *sola scriptura* cannot be a bone of contention, for it is fully and firmly accepted by Rome. Like Küng,¹ he claims that 'the supreme authority of Scripture, taken in its positive sense, as gradually drawn out and systematized by Protestants themselves . . . should be the best possible warrant for their return to understanding and unity' (p. 166). Interestingly, perhaps oddly, he claims to find the positive insights of the Reformers fully present in the writings of the Counter-Reformation mystic, St. John of the Cross. Protestantism in its broad outlines is Biblical, and the heir of the Reformers is Karl Barth.

For Bouyer all that is positive and true in Protestantism is already there in Roman Catholicism. One is reminded of Küng's remarkable argument that Barth's doctrine of justification is in fact the Roman one. The logic of the situation would then, it seems, compel reunion or absorption. Why does this not take place? A Protestant might answer that the accretions of the Roman Church have distorted the Gospel, and these must first be removed, restoring the Church to purity and unity together. But Bouyer argues that the positive insights of the Reformers have, from the beginning, been presented in a distorted way, and distortion breeds heresy and schism. The second part of the book is devoted to the analysis of some of these 'distortions', the shadow-side of Protestantism.

II. EXTRINSIC JUSTIFICATION

Bouyer claims that in Protestantism along with the great positive affirmation that we are saved by grace alone there

¹ Hans Küng, *The Council and Reunion*, London, 1961.

comes a parasitic conception that it changes nothing in doing so. Luther's *semper justus semper peccator* is a dangerous intrusion. The Reformers' favourite imagery of being 'clothed in the righteousness of Christ', he suggests, means that no real change takes place in justification. Justification is not simply the declaring just but also the actual making just by God. The Reformation teaching, he declares, is lopsided. It implies a grace without a content; it suggests that the Word of God is not powerful and active. All serious exegetes, he claims, hold that for Paul justification involves 'an interior change' and 'a new capacity . . . to perform acts pleasing of themselves to God' (pp. 175-176).

This criticism reveals a good deal of misunderstanding, and seems to rest on a rejection of the whole substitutionary emphasis in the New Testament, and on a failure to distinguish justification and sanctification as two distinct if closely connected movements. I doubt if Bouyer is fair either to Scripture or to Luther! He suggests that modern scientific exegesis 'unanimously acknowledges' that *δικαιοῦν* can only mean 'to declare officially just some one who is so in reality' (p. 181). But this position is not accepted by N. H. Snaith² or J. K. S. Reid,³ for example. Bouyer seems to feel that justification in essence is an ethical change within man, whereas in fact the Biblical usage of the term seems to have a forensic and relational significance. 'The righteousness which God adjudicates to man . . . is not "sinlessness" in the sense of ethical perfection, but is "sinlessness" in the sense that God does not "count" man's sins against him.'⁴ If Bouyer is wrong in suggesting that what he calls 'extrinsic justification' is an unbiblical idea, he is also wrong when he claims that the Reformers taught that no real change is associated with justification. Justification and sanctification are inextricably continuous with each other. In a very different sphere the same type of continuity is found if it is true, as some educationists suggest, that the surest way for a teacher to turn a student into a scholar is to treat him *as if* he were a scholar already. Luther is quite clear that faith and works cannot be divorced, that 'faith becomes active in love', and is 'poured out in works'. Good fruit necessarily comes from a good tree. Luther speaks of an 'alien' or 'passive' righteousness received in justification, but this is the ground for active righteousness in sanctification. 'Therefore, when some say that good works are forbidden when we preach faith alone, it is as if I said to a sick man: "If you had health, you would have the use of all your limbs, but without health the works

² *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson. Article 'Just'.

³ *Ibid.* 'Sanctify'.

⁴ R. Bultman, *Theology of the New Testament*, London, 1952, Vol. I, p. 276.

of all your limbs are nothing"; and he wanted to infer that I had forbidden the work of all his limbs; whereas, on the contrary, I meant that he must first have health which will work all the works of all the members.⁵ For Luther, justification is the very condition of moral goodness, for only the justified man is able to be assured of his salvation and turn outwards to his neighbour in truly altruistic love. And yet Luther retains an eschatological emphasis which Bouyer would entirely neglect.

The teaching of Calvin echoes that of Luther. Justification does not make us righteous but imputes to us the righteousness of Christ.⁶ 'We are justified not without, and yet not by, works, since in the participation of Christ, by which we are justified, is contained no less sanctification than justification . . . Christ justifies no man without also sanctifying him.'⁷ Justification and sanctification should be distinguished, but cannot be separated. If sanctification is a growth, its root and beginning is justification, both together comprising the gift of Christ and incorporation into Him. Bouyer, I feel, is operating within Thomist categories which make it hard for him to appreciate the very different categories of Biblical and Reformation thought in their fullness. Justification is extrinsic if that means it is the gracious act of God. But it is extrinsic in Bouyer's pejorative sense only if justification is wrenched from its setting and treated in artificial abstraction. Bouyer attributes to the Reformers a doctrine that they never taught.

III. NOMINALISM, THOMISM AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

What is the source of the defects in Protestant thought which Bouyer claims to discover? His answer is that Protestantism unintentionally became the prisoner of nominalism, and could not escape from its philosophical inadequacies. Nominalism, he writes, is 'the utter corruption of Christian thought' (p. 198). The Reformers lapsed unavoidably into heresy because they were utterly dependent on the decaying heritage of the Middle Ages, and were neither as radical nor as Biblical as they aspired to be. Luther, in particular, was a disciple of Occam, and from him drew his own 'degrading' conception of man. Occam, says Bouyer, denies the possibility of revelation, 'conceiving God himself as a Protean figure impossible to apprehend' (p. 186). Voluntarism has produced a conception of an arbitrary God which is 'the negation of any possible theology' (p. 197). 'In such a system God is only God in so far as

⁵ Martin Luther, *A Treatise of Good Works*, in Philadelphia Edition of *The Works of Martin Luther*, 1915-32, Vol. I, p. 199. On 'passive righteousness' see Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, London, 1953, esp. pp. 22, 25, 28.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.2. Cf. W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, London, 1956, pp. 126-139.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.16.1.

he is beyond the true and the false, good and evil. Truth, falsehood, good, evil, are no more than hypotheses he has actually adopted; there is no reason why he should not have taken them in the contrary sense or why he should be prevented from reversing them' (p. 197). Thus God 'appears a monster repugnant both to common sense and to moral feeling, affronting in either way the truest of our instincts, God's trace left intact in his creature, even when impaired and blinded by sin' (p. 199). Protestantism adopted 'the worm-eaten framework of a decadent medievalism' which suffocated the truth in Protestant teaching and led to a strange tendency which he discerns in Protestantism to reverse its own affirmations. Nominalism is 'a philosophy closed to the living God', and Bouyer himself feels that the Church must reject all nominalism and is 'greatly in favour of a realist system like Thomism' (p. 199).

We are not concerned here with defending nominalism against these rather extreme accusations. One simply wonders whether the Reformers were as much enthralled as Bouyer suggests. Both Luther and Calvin were suspicious of philosophy as such and regarded themselves as Biblical, not philosophic, theologians. Calvin's *Institutes* is intended to be simply 'the sum of what we find God wishes to teach us in his Word'.⁸ With *sola fide* and *sola gratia* goes *sola scriptura*. The Reformers distrusted the use of reason and philosophic methods in theology. And in reacting against philosophy they were in fact reacting against a late medieval tradition that was almost entirely nominalist. Luther's early *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* (1517)⁹ shows clearly that already Luther distrusts philosophy, both that of 'that damned, rascally, conceited heathen' Aristotle, and of Occam and Gabriel Biel, the leading nominalist authorities, the ground of his disagreement being that they are Pelagian and, therefore, deny the Biblical doctrine of justification, and that they overestimate the integrity of reason. 'No one', writes Luther, 'can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle'.

But to say that the Reformers strove to be Biblical and were suspicious of philosophy does not imply that they were uninfluenced by nominalist thought. In certain important particulars the Reformers seem to have felt that nominalism and the Scriptures were at one. One could well argue that the voluntarist idea of God, bogey though it may be to Bouyer, is more Biblical than the Thomist. And in general the Reformers seem to have accepted the nominalist account of the relation of reason and revelation as Biblical. Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms probably shows the clear imprint of this aspect of nominalist thought. It is the nominalist rejection of the

⁸ Preface to the French Edition.

⁹ In Vol. XXXI, pp. 4 ff., of the new American Edition of Luther's Works.

analogy of being which above all disturbs Bouyer. He is deeply suspicious of the nominalist assertion of absolute discontinuity between man and God, the creature and the Creator. Bouyer sees clearly that nominalism is destructive of *natural* theology, but he assumes that this means it is destructive of theology as such. The Reformers' position would be, I think, that nominalism ends a confusion of philosophy and theology which has proved radically destructive of theological thinking. Nominalism leaves room for a theology of revelation, but does not presume to judge or evaluate the truths of revelation.

It seems to me that the Reformers had far keener philosophical acumen than Bouyer credits to them. They were at least aware of the dangers of perversion of Biblical theology through slavery to a philosophic system. In as far as they used nominalist conceptions it was because they felt them to be congruent with Scriptural teaching. Bouyer does not substantiate his rather extreme accusations. There is much that can be said against Thomism also! And it is interesting that one of the tensions within the Roman Church itself which the Vatican Council has brought into the open is that between the traditional philosophic theology of Thomism and the new Biblical or 'positive' theology which does not find Thomism an adequate vehicle for Biblical insights.

IV. SCRIPTURE, CHURCH AND TRADITION

Bouyer is, on the whole, quite generous in his description of the Protestant attitude to the authority of Scripture, and its relation to ecclesiology. He recognizes that the Reformers were not fundamentalists in the modern sense, and along with the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture paid close attention to the interpretation of the Scriptures within the Church and to the work of the Holy Spirit in guiding interpretation. He professes to see little difference between this and the teaching of the Roman Church for 'it is now absolutely clear, not only that Scripture is inspired, but that there is no other ecclesiastical document of which the same may be said, even a solemn definition of Pope or Council' (p. 161). Thus, a common acceptance of the *sola scriptura* should bring understanding and reunion closer, and would do so, were it not for Protestantism's 'congenital tendency to reverse its own affirmations', so that it spawns fantastically extreme doctrines of Scriptural authority, both fundamentalist and liberal.

But let us examine a little more closely his teaching about the relationship of Church and Scripture. The Church, he says, cannot change Scripture, or enlarge it, nor is the Church endowed with the same inspiration. But alongside Scripture there is in the Church unwritten tradition which is apostolic and authoritative because it also has been received from the very mouth of Christ and handed down from the Apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. 'These . . . are not important as

additions to the facts and truths contained in Scripture, but as maintaining these clear and precise in the living Church' (p. 242). This narrow definition of tradition may look on the surface the same as the hermeneutical tradition to which the Reformers themselves would accord some authority, although it seems to be rather misleading as an exposition of the Decrees of Trent which lay down a 'two-source' doctrine of revelation. For Bouyer the unwritten tradition is simply a guard against false interpretation of Scripture and is ultimately the same as the presence of the Spirit within the Church who, he claims, ensures that the Church never teaches anything not taught by the Apostles. Thus we are to have *both* the *sola scriptura* and the infallibility of the teaching office. And it is at this point that a Protestant must cry Halt, for this means that the teaching of the Church is no longer to be subordinated to Scripture. The two have become complementary and equally authoritative.

A consequence of Bouyer's position is that he is incapable of understanding the Protestant objections to the development of Mariology. He argues that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception shows Mary to be 'the masterpiece of grace', and the Catholic doctrine no more than a demonstration of the sovereignty of grace. This may be the case, but the Protestant objection is not so much that the recent Mariological dogmas deny the *sola gratia* (though perhaps that is there too), but that they deny the *sola scriptura* and demonstrate by their existence a 'two-source' theory of revelation of a type with which Bouyer himself would not seem to agree.

The core of the disagreement between Protestantism and Rome is in the field of ecclesiology, and particularly in what we mean by calling the Church 'Apostolic'. Bouyer rejects out of hand some more alarming ideas held by Roman Catholics. The heart of apostolicity is, he says, 'the presence of him who sends in those he sent', and he is quite willing to agree that the apostolate of the Apostles and that of the Church are not the same in as far as the former laid the foundations on which the latter built. The 'apostolic men' within the Church are not 'Apostles', for they are not inspired or authoritative in the same sense and they may not lay any foundation but that which is laid. This argument is, of course, a rejoinder to Cullmann. Does he meet Cullmann's point? The difference between the two men lies, I think, in the fact that Bouyer believes that the Church is apostolic not simply in being founded upon and faithful to the apostolic witness, but also because it possesses within itself an apostolic hierarchy of men who may not be Apostles in the full sense but nevertheless have peculiar authority as Vicars of Christ. The Church is therefore the extension of the Incarnation, 'created and kept in being by the "apostolate" of the Son of God, of the Living Word made flesh, prolonging himself in all times and places, in human form, by the "apostolate" of those the Son sent in his turn, as he had been sent by the Father' (pp.

262-263). Such teaching is totally unacceptable to a Protestant, confusing as it does the Head and his members of the Body, the work of the Incarnate Christ and the work of the Church, making grace the chattel of the Church and the Holy Spirit its soul.

From this standpoint Bouyer develops what I can only call a highly irresponsible critique of the Reformed Church. He, unlike Küng, is incapable of stomaching the principle of reformation and seems to detest the idea that a Church should be conformable to the Word of God. He fails to understand that the Reformers at no time felt themselves to be *remaking* the Church, but *reforming* it, i.e. removing from the Bride of Christ tawdry man-made adornments which hid her true beauty. 'From the moment of their creation', writes Bouyer, 'the Protestant Churches were merely the works of men . . . God is absent from the Protestant ecclesiastical organization, it being a purely human creation, even when, as in Calvinism, it aims at least at being conformed to divine command' (pp. 260-261). 'In the place of divine authority in the Church, Protestantism set up purely human ones' (p. 252).

All this of course flows from his doctrine of the Church as the continuation of the Incarnation, as having the Holy Spirit as its soul. Even his admission of the degeneration of the medieval Church cannot make him see the need or possibility of reform, for all reformation is man-made and presumptuous interference. We can be glad, however, that Bouyer's extremism at this point, his confusion of the Church and the Church's Lord, is not shared by all Roman theologians. Küng, for example, writes: 'The Church needs not only one to form her in the first place, but always, because she is deformed, a *reformer*. And this is Christ himself'.¹⁰

No one can deny that Bouyer's work is significant, based as it is on a great deal of knowledge of Protestant theology and life. He tries very hard to be sympathetic but this simply leads him into inconsistency, for his rejection of Protestantism is in fact total. On the whole, although his may seem to be a fresh and original approach to an old controversy, his entrenchments are the old ones and the battle-lines the same. Protestants should read him with care and face up to his arguments and criticisms, but among Roman Catholics I am afraid he will fortify complacency. If the logic of Protestantism leads one to Rome, as he claims, it is also clear that for him the logic of Romanism is that they should stay exactly where they have always been. We can thank God that there are other thinkers like Küng, Cullmann and Barth who suggest that the logic of both Protestantism and Romanism leads through reformation to one church which is neither Protestant nor Roman but Christian, in which we are united as brothers by our obedience to one Lord. For 'where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church' (Ignatius).

¹⁰ Hans Küng, *op. cit.*, p. 49.