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pdfs are named: [Volume]_[1st page of article]

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ARTICLE

ESCHATOLOGY AND ETHICS

It was, I believe, at the Oxford Conference of 1937 on Life and Work that English representatives had their attention drawn to a parody of Dr. Merrill's hymn, 'Rise up, O men of God' from the hand of a Scottish student who had thus given expression to the doctrine of up-to-date Calvinistic Barthianism. Of course I do not mean, nor would he, that either Calvin or Barth would have put it quite in this way:—

'Sit down, O men of God,
His Kingdom He will bring
Whenever it may please His will,
You cannot do a thing!'

Certainly the lines as they stand express a religion of pure eschatology; no less certainly do they suggest the irrelevancy of ethics as a means to that end which the word eschatology presupposes. Man's behaviour and the coming of God's Kingdom have nothing to do with one another. Human activity has about it nothing either of approach to the Kingdom or of preparation for it. The proper counterpart to God's activity of the future is man's passivity of the present.

All this, it may be said, is very extreme, and the paradox of a parody must not be taken as a serious theological statement. Is it not a theologoumenon which no theologian would sponsor? I shall not waste time in examination of its phraseology; but I am concerned to point out that a serious issue is involved: the issue, as I see it, is the result of that immensely increased attention to Eschatology which began as a revolt against the Liberal-Protestant tradition in New Testament exegesis, asserted its claim to provide the one scientific interpretation of the historic Jesus, became emotionally attractive as a result of the apocalyptic

devastation of war, and worked itself out dogmatically in the theologies of Barth and Berdyaev who, with all their differences, were one in their essentially eschatological outlook, while they had as their opposite number in the ranks of secular materialism the Marxists who looked to a future perfection in which there would be only memories and no experience of the economic miseries of which past history was full. For they, too, lived and live in hope of the day when it will be said—though the voice will not be that of God but of the dialectical process of history—‘Behold I make all things new’. The superiority of the Marxian interpretation of contemporary history to that of modern Liberalism is noted by Reinhold Niebuhr in his chapter ‘Christian Politics and Communist Religion’, contributed to the volume entitled *Christianity and the Social Revolution*. ‘In one of its aspects’, he says, ‘Marxism is a modern application, rather than a modernized version, of Jewish prophecy and eschatology. . . . Its perfectionism expresses itself in the hope of a redeemed community.’

From all these causes and in all these ways eschatology has come to receive the fullest attention. And for this revival there is obviously a great deal to be said. Interpretations of the text of the Gospels, of Christianity, and of human history, which ignore or make little of the relevance of eschatology have no answers to questions which the serious student is bound to ask.

Eschatology has come in, in part at least, as a sharp reaction against an appreciation both of religion and of life which laid stress predominantly upon the ethical associations of both—upon the ethical witness of religion and the ethical significance of life. It was the feeling for the unchallengeable supremacy of Christ's teaching on the moral side which gave a peculiar impressiveness and attraction to such books as Sir John Seeley's *Ecce Homo* and Harnack's *What is Christianity?* The typical Liberalism of the nineteenth century found its intellectual basis and its practical driving force in the conviction of the supremacy of the ethical. It was essentially Kantian in its reverence for the good will, and in some of its greatest, or, at least, most typical figures, it was passionately concerned for the enthronement of righteousness in human life. A reader of the volume *Great Christians*¹ will find that one after another of the Christian leaders there depicted, though they differed widely in their ecclesiastical

¹ *Great Christians*, ed. R. S. Forman (Ivor Nicholson and Watson 1933).

loyalties, was fired with the conviction that Christianity, or more precisely, the Christian Church, was called to raise man's life on the moral side, and that in doing so it was doing the work of God. It is easy to smile at that Nonconformist Conscience which was a power in the land when I was an undergraduate; but scholars like Fairbairn and Forsyth and James Hope Moulton, pastors like John Clifford and Hugh Price Hughes were no mere controversialists pledged to a party cause when they took their Christianity into politics. Certainly they were not infallible in their pursuit of righteousness; but there could be no doubt that in devotion to moral principle they saw one of the proofs of a living Christianity. A little behind them in the past stood the great men of their own tradition, R. W. Dale and John Bright, just as behind Henry Scott Holland and R. W. Dolling stood F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley and W. E. Gladstone.

And, it may truly be said, their works do follow them. The ethical concern which was so real for these men has not perished from the thoughts and imaginations of Christians. Stockholm and Oxford testify to a Christian preoccupation with the common life of man, more widely shared and more ready to look all hard questions in the face than was ever true in the nineteenth century or before the war. But the difference comes to light when we look at the doctrinal background of Christian ethical action. A generation ago there was a general sense of the existence of a true relation between man's action and God's, and of the rightfulness of an appeal to the teaching of Jesus in vindication thereof. Man's activity and God's were not absolutely continuous; but man's ethical endeavours and, more especially, but not by way of contrast, those of the Christian and the Christian Church, fell within the circle of God's present activity. In the missionary and evangelizing work of the Church God's Kingdom was being extended throughout the world, and the Kingdom, when it finally came, would be a consummation of what was already there in the world, not the manifestation of something quite new. On the philosophical side this involved the strong affirmation of the ethical value inherent in human personality, a value which in itself challenged the apparent victory of death, since it could not be supposed that a fact of the physical order could be destructive of a super-physical

reality. What we now know as the philosophy of values, and connect especially, among Christian philosophers, with the name of Dr. Inge, had not then become familiar, but there was much in Christian thought which was of the nature of preparation for it. In Höffding's book on the philosophy of religion, the conservation of values, viewed especially in relation to ethics, was treated as the fundamental postulate of religion, while W. R. Sorley, in his Gifford Lectures, *Moral Values and the Idea of God*, reached the conclusion that 'the recognition of the moral order, and of its relation to nature and man, involves the acknowledgement of the Supreme Mind or God as the ground of all reality'.

In this concentration upon ethical experience both faith and hope were involved. There was the faith that man has true moral knowledge, that he knows, however rightly the limitations in the wholeness of his knowledge might be emphasized, the meaning of the Good, and that, with his knowledge of the Good, man possessed an affinity with it, so that his ethical knowledge was not a knowledge of something existing wholly outside himself. There was also the hope of ethical achievement, a hope which itself presupposed faith in the possibility of such achievement. I do not think it would be fair to say that in the case of Christian teachers this faith degenerated into a mere shallow confidence in man's powers, or the hope into an easy optimism as to the success of the work of the Church. But it was not felt that frustration waited upon all human effort; there was no despair of man *qua* man.

It is this despair of man *qua* man which has been in the air from the 1920's onwards and remains in the air. It is, of course, not Christian thinkers that one has primarily in mind. The gloom that developed in the years which followed the war and the treaty was spread by writers who stood quite apart from the Christian tradition. And while a Christian may appear to clothe himself with a garment of gloom sufficient to gain for himself an honorary, though in fact undeserved, nickname, it is impossible for a Christian to be a pessimist in the proper sense of the term: for a true pessimist puts a minus sign against existence, and that a Christian who believes in God the Creator and Redeemer can never do.

On the other hand, an anthropology, sharply challenging all

optimistic evaluations of man as he is, is possible for a Christian ; and that in two ways. On the one hand, there can be such an emphasis upon the doctrine of the Fall that man's incapacity for true knowledge and good works is not to be measured by any degrees of more and less. This is familiar to us in the writings of Augustine and of the sixteenth-century Reformers, and gains formal expression in Confessions of Faith drawn up in that century and later. According to this view any real ethical activity is impossible for man until he is regenerate. Nature, as denaturalized by the effects of the Fall, stands contrasted with Grace, whereby the defaced image of God in man is restored and good works become possible.

In so far as a reaction against easy confidence in the natural goodness of man and his power to act rightly and to achieve moral results in the present world has thrown Christian thought back upon the classic Christian doctrines of the Fall, Original Sin, and Grace, nothing has happened which might not have been expected ; nor, except in the case of those who view that complex of doctrines in anything like its traditional form with disapproval, is there ground for misgiving or anxiety. That is not, as it seems to me, at all equally true of the second way in which man's ethical capacity can be challenged. What I have in mind is the uncertainty into which man's ethical life is plunged when the validity of human knowledge in relation to the idea of the good is questioned, when the ethical is affirmed only as that which God commands, when the testimony of conscience, especially as a pointer from man to God, is depreciated, and when the relation of the divine order of that other world which is yet to be manifested is construed as a relation of contrast to the order of this world, in which man is pursuing ends that express to him here and now the meaning of his life. For, as to this last point, if that which belongs to human life beyond the present has as its primary, if not its whole, relation to the life which exists here in the present, the fact of contrast, the value of man's ethical activity would appear to be greatly diminished. That the form of human action should be obedience to God's will remains unaffected ; but that what man accomplishes has a more than this-worldly significance, that the various buildings which he erects in the movements of his life are by way of preparation for that perfect building which is the City of

God—to affirm anything like this becomes very difficult, if certain powerful tendencies in the Christian thought of to-day are followed out to their logical conclusion.

I doubt if the eschatological school, whether in the sphere of Gospel criticism and interpretation or in that of dogmatics, has done justice to the profundity of the stress laid in the Bible upon God's requirement of righteousness in human life, and to the presupposition that this requirement is a just one, since man is capable of knowing the difference between right and wrong and is not incapable of doing right. The ethical impressiveness of the Old Testament is not unconnected with the fact that in the Old Testament an eschatology which involves the relevance to man of a super-earthly order of existence, appears only towards the end of the period covered by the literature. The good man lives and dies happy, and the nation when restored to and confirmed in righteousness may look forward to a glorious future, but within the framework of this world. What we do find emerging in the Old Testament is the sense of the inadequacy of ethics apart from an eschatological judgement. The sufferings of the righteous man constitute a real moral problem and, if the story ends there, the end is not intelligible and is not right. 'Job' seems to me to strike a real and very important blow on the ethical side, and I cannot at all agree with the late Sir Edwyn Hoskyns—would that that *clarum et venerabile nomen* could hear me say so!—that 'for 35 chapters blasphemy after blasphemy . . . proceed from Job's mouth'.¹ Not for a moment do I believe that the author would have said with Sir Edwyn that Job's friends were 'mainly in the right'. Doubtless Job is crushed, as any one would be crushed, by the direct revelation of God; but still the ethical problem remains, and neither through the manifestation of God's power in Behemoth and Leviathan nor through the kind of substitute-eschatology of Job's final earthly happiness is it solved. After all, God cannot 'do anything' in the ordinary sense of those words. To act unrighteously or unlovingly is not possible for Him: but of course I recognize that the meaning of such a denial will depend on whether we do or do not think that we possess any ethical criterion applicable in the case of God's action. If we want something very like an explicit denial of any such criterion we shall find it in state-

¹ E. C. Hoskyns *Cambridge Sermons* p. 67.

ments of Barth: 'morality is truly grounded only upon the pure will of God', . . . 'His will is . . . the source and sanction of all good, and it is good only because it is what He wills'; 'there is no doubt a great and universal human "building" at which we all, in our various ways, labour in fear and trembling; but it is a work in which the will of God at no single point touches or overlaps with the will of man.' Brunner in his latest work, *The Divine Imperative*, is equally decisive; the Christian conception of God, he declares, 'cannot be defined in terms of principle at all'; and, interpreting the message of the Bible, he appeals to the Old Testament, where it is first made plain that 'the Good has its basis and its existence solely in the will of God', and goes on to affirm that 'the Good is simply and solely the will of God.'

I doubt whether the logic of this argument really does justice to the Bible. But, if it be accepted, any argument from human experience in this world to divine action upon this world or for the bringing in of another world will be illegitimate. Yet the appearance of eschatological doctrine in Hebrew religion derives from the sense of the need that God should vindicate His righteousness on behalf of those who are being oppressed by human wickedness. The Kingdom of God is a manifestation of that righteousness; as a manifestation it belongs to the future; but in what is manifested it represents in perfection what is already present in this world, namely the morally good. The Kingdom of God cannot be simply discontinuous at all points with the present order, unless the word 'righteousness' carries a different meaning when it is applied to God from that which it possesses when applied to man.

It is in relation to the conception of the Kingdom that the problem of the adjustment—if that be possible—of ethical and eschatological ways of thinking is most pressing, and that the differences between those two ways reveal themselves most sharply. Is the Kingdom future and *not* present, wholly supernatural, discontinuous with all that man is doing in this world? or is it at least in some way already present, and therefore standing in some positive relation to what man is doing or trying to do? If it is the former, eschatology means the wholly other, that which lies beyond the end of nature and history. If it is the latter, its coming will mean a consummation, not a supersession,

of the human and natural in so far as the human and natural are receptive in the present order of the Kingdom.

If the first alternative is taken, I do not see what we can make of man's ethical life. The seriousness goes out of it, if its strivings, and all that comes to pass through them, are unconnected with the revelation by which God will bring all things temporal and terrestrial to an end. Man may be saved, but not his works. We shall find true religion to involve not so much despair of this world as a sense of its unimportance, and, in effect, we shall view all forms of aloofness from it as in themselves desirable.

Such a conclusion would be hard to resist if the thorough-going eschatological interpretation of the ministry and teaching of our Lord, such as we associate with the names of Schweitzer and Loisy, were accepted. And any doctrine of the orders and institutions of human life which allowed them no significance in relation to God's purposes would lead us to the same result. I do not think that Brunner's treatment of the orders in his book, *The Divine Imperative*, necessitates that conclusion: his argument is indeed incompatible with it: for it is this life, he holds, which is to be recreated in the new age as 'The Kingdom of Perfection'. And however much we may dissent from his teaching that the State possesses meaning only owing to the fact of sin, that may be set down to the general account of Reformation theology.

So long as this epoch of world-history persists, in which the kingdoms of the world present the most violent contrast to anything which Christians can believe about the Kingdom of God, the fascination of pure eschatology which expounds that contrast dogmatically will continue. Nevertheless there are signs of a change of outlook. Both in New Testament scholarship and in the interpretation of history, from the standpoint of Christian faith and with the background of Christian dogmatics, the antithesis of an ethical or an eschatological world-view is becoming less tenable. Such books as C. H. Dodd's *Parables*, Otto's *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man*, H. G. Wood's *Christianity and the Nature of History*, with Berdyaev's works—Berdyaev's thinking is far more rational than his queer way of putting things suggests—all make for reconciliation. The Gospel is not purely eschatological, as though the only command which

expressed its essence were 'Have faith, and wait for the coming of the Kingdom'. Otto, though I cannot agree with his description of the eschatological teaching in the Gospels as 'irrational', which results from his affirmation that a rational eschatology would leave no place for ethical demands, rightly contends that the 'command to love God above all things and one's neighbour as oneself is not valid because the Kingdom is coming, but by its very nature it puts us into a position where we feel we need repentance, and its demand cannot be made more concrete in any way by the circumstance of eschatology'. The command is an absolute one: and I do not see how, *pace* both Brunner and Berdyaev, we can avoid the affirmation of ethical law and principle. But be that as it may, in the demand for love the ethical character of the present life is compendiously stated through an interpretation which does justice to all its particular elements and is pressed upon man for his obedience. And just here we must reckon with, and draw strength from, the eschatology which is a real part of the Gospel, and inseparable from it. The kingdom will not come only when man's obedience is complete: if we had to wait till then, we should wait for ever, for of that completeness there is no guarantee or promise or rational expectation. In Eschatology we have the assurance of the fulfilment of the incompleteness of human history and human ethic. I am in substantial agreement with C. H. Dodd's words 'the real, inward, and eternal meaning [of history], striving for expression in the course of history, is completely expressed in the *eschaton*, which is therefore organically related to history'—since he guards against the notion of mere unfolding, mere prolongation, by his recognition that the *eschaton* is unique and unlike any other just because it is final. And of that *eschaton*, that Day of the Lord with which history ends, the pledge for the Christian is that Day of the Lord within history in which Christ was born and crucified and rose again. Christ, who is, in Barth's words, 'the meaning and goal of human history', is yet within history; He is the true Goal but also the true Way, and in the following of Him man's moral life gains a quality and value which we rightly describe as eternal.

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