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Recent Trends in Systematic Theology

WILLIAM HORDERN

THE TWENTIETH century has witnessed a great revival in theology and theological concerns. It is difficult for a seminary student today to realize that quite recently theology was in eclipse. In many quarters philosophy of religion was hailed as the successor to theology. In biblical studies historical and critical questions had pushed biblical theology from the scene. All of that has changed radically. A theological revolution began with Barth's publication of his commentary on Romans in 1918 and continued up to the second World War. During this time theology was disrupted with revolutionary thinking and bitter battles. Since World War Two theology has witnessed a consolidation of the earlier revolution. Important advances have been made but the changes have not been so radical and the waters have not been so turbulent.

A quick look at the present scene in theology can be had by reading a series recently published by Westminster Press.¹ Three theologians, E. J. Carnell, L. H. DeWolf, and the writer, were asked to state the case for orthodox, liberal, and new reformation theologies respectively. This series makes clear that the sharp lines drawn between these theological positions in the twenties and thirties have been blurred or even disappeared. The remarkable thing about these three books is the large area of agreement. All men express faith in the unique revelation of God through Christ, a revelation that brings redemption to man who otherwise is lost in sin. All agree in ultimately resting their case on the biblical revelation but none of them accepts the Bible mechanically or literally. All of them show a deep desire to learn from the Christian past but they have no wish to become slaves to the past.

Equally important with the areas of agreement is a willingness in each of the books to enter into creative conversation with other points of view. No one of them claims to have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. E. J. Carnell, writing for orthodoxy, speaks for the spirit of all three when he says of his own position, "Orthodoxy does not have all the answers; nor does it always ask the right questions. And when it gives the right answers to the right questions, it often corrupts its claims with bad manners."² If one compares this irenic discussion with the fratricidal strife of the fundamentalist-liberal controversy or with the angry bitterness of earlier

1. Carnell, E. J., *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959. DeWolf, L. H., *The Case for Theology in Liberal Perspective*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959. Hordern, William, *The Case for a New Reformation Theology*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959.

2. Carnell, E. J., *op. cit.*, p. 139.

debates between liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, it is evident that theology has moved sharply towards greater agreement and towards a more harmonious discussion.

This is not to say that all issues have been resolved. The series reveals that there are still areas of real difference. In particular, the issues of revelation and knowledge of God are very much alive. Orthodoxy is still arguing for the reality of propositional revelation and liberalism is defending natural theology, while the new reformation position denies both. Although there is agreement on the centrality of Christ, Christology and atonement are still points where agreement is not complete. There will still be debate between these schools but it is going to sound more like an argument within the same family than a debate between opposing faiths (as it has so often seemed to be in the past).

But the series reveals something else. In many ways the liveliest debates in theology today are no longer between the three schools which it presents. It is most significant that in this series neither Paul Tillich nor Rudolf Bultmann is given a hearing, and many readers have felt that their own position did not lie with any one of the three. We can no longer suppose that the only live options in theology are fundamentalism, liberalism, and neo-orthodoxy.

Without doubt the most significant happening in theology during the past decade has been the continuation of Karl Barth's monumental *Church Dogmatics* and its translation into English (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark). Whether one agrees with Barth or not, it cannot be denied that he is the most impressive theological thinker today as he has been for the last forty years. We hear much today about the "new Barth" who has emerged in more recent writings. It is debatable whether or not there is a new Barth. Certainly the mature Barth of the *Dogmatics* is quite different from the brash young man who wrote the commentary on Romans. And as one reads the *Dogmatics* he finds nothing to uphold the stereotype of Barth that has been dominant on this side of the Atlantic. That is, Barth does not appear as an irrationalist who shuns social responsibilities and offers salvation without a new life for man. But it is doubtful that there has been a change in Barth here; it is rather that Barth has been consistently misunderstood and misrepresented. One thing is clear: the Barth of 1918 and the Barth of today stand squarely on the complete initiative of God in both revelation and salvation. But, as volume IV,2, of the *Dogmatics* makes clear, this is not to deny man's real participation as the covenant-partner of God. And in a recent work Barth can say, "Theology is in reality not only the doctrine of God, but the doctrine of God and man."³

This means that today Barth does not emphasize so exclusively the otherness of God. Over against a liberalism that began with man and his experience, Barth had to shout his protest in the name of God's transcendence. But now that the point has been made, he is able and willing to see

3. Barth, Karl, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 25.

the availability of God for man. Furthermore, having repudiated the liberal's optimism about man, Barth has shown the true optimism of the Christian Gospels. G. C. Berkouwer rightly called his book, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*.⁴ As one reads the *Dogmatics* one is again and again impressed at the joyous hope that pervades it. It is impossible to understand how some can still refer to Barth as a pessimist. The Christian Gospel that Barth proclaims is not that man is a sinner but that he is a redeemed sinner. Furthermore, he emphasizes the fact that God has loved the *world* and redeemed it. Christianity does not take a dim view of the world as such.

In light of the development of Barth's thought I feel that the time has come to speak of a "post-neo-orthodox" theology. The term "neo-orthodox" was never accepted as a banner by any group of theological thinkers. It was a term invented by critics of the position so designated. It is dubious if such a thing as "neo-orthodoxy" ever did exist except in the fevered minds of its opponents. But, whereas the earlier thought of the men called "neo-orthodox" tended to emphasize sin and the separation of God and man, the new emphasis is upon salvation and the reconciliation of God and man. The earlier emphasis was made necessary by the theological climate in which Barth, Niebuhr, and the others first wrote. But as that climate has been changed by these men themselves, they have been able to demonstrate that there was more to their position than its initial protest. This makes most references to "neo-orthodoxy" today sound archaic.

In light of the later emphases of "neo-orthodoxy," contemporary theology is showing a real concern for conversation with culture. In a recent book, outlining this current concern, Roger Hazelton says: "To one who has been brought up theologically on Barth and Brunner, Niebuhr and Nygren, it is startling . . . to find one's fellow theologians reading Baudelaire or Rilke, listening to off-beat music and going to off-Broadway shows."⁵ This statement sounds very strange to me because it is precisely from the theologians that he mentions that I have been motivated to understand the world and culture to which we must preach the Gospel. In fact, I would argue that an important fruit of the last forty years in theology is that today's theologian realizes that he must speak to the culture in which he finds himself. Whereas liberalism saw the necessity of speaking to the modern world and fundamentalism saw the need to preserve the Gospel, the last forty years in theology have come to see that we must do both together.

At certain points this concern for theological conversation with culture shows dangers of becoming overly enthusiastic. Many of the theological interpreters have found "Christian" insights in strange places. A true conversation with culture must take unbelief seriously and not try to find Christian elements where none are intended. Recently I heard a philosopher

4. Berkouwer, G. C., *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956.

5. Hazelton, Roger, *New Accents in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 14.

taking a theologian to task for claiming that there are deep "Christian" insights in the works of Sartre. I think that the philosopher was quite right. We will not find the Gospel preached directly or indirectly in Sartre, Camus, or Tennessee Williams. But what the theologian can find in such authors is a vivid portrayal of the essence of the age to which we are called to proclaim the Gospel.

Ever since the rediscovery of Kierkegaard there has been considerable theological concern with existentialism. The term "existentialism" still remains rather vague and, since men as diverse as Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Buber, and Bultmann are called existentialist, it is evident that no precise school of thought is designated by the term. A good introduction to existentialism from a theologian with a deep appreciation for it is David Roberts, *Existentialism and Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957). An excellent theological critique is Arthur Cochrane, *The Existentialists and God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956). In my opinion, one of the best books on Kierkegaard is Martin Heinecken, *The Moment Before God* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1956).

The conversation between theology and existentialism is now sufficiently advanced so that some conclusions can be drawn. There is no doubt but that there are valid elements in existentialism which theology must appropriate. True theological thinking must always be an existential involvement in the faith and not an objective examination of subject matter. The existentialist examination of man's experience of anxiety, decision, and search for himself are important for theology. But I believe that the existentialist emphasis in theology is on the wane.

It is apparent that existentialist philosophy has not made significant inroads into Anglo-Saxon philosophy and it is probably past its peak on the continent. The theologian who desires to speak to his culture is not so likely to be speaking to an existentialist as he is to be the one who drags in existentialist thought. Furthermore, many theologians are beginning to wonder if existentialist thought-forms are adequate to express the Gospel. Can we so simply identify the "being" analysed in existentialism with God, the Creator, as Tillich attempts to do? Does not existentialism force us to begin with such a man-centred framework that the reality of the God who comes to man is obscured? Is it not the case that the anthropology of existentialism is only a study of man as he exists in the first Adam while Christian anthropology must be based on Christ, the Second Adam? Questions like these are causing many theologians to take some serious second thoughts about the marriage between existentialism and theology that seemed well on its way to consummation ten years ago.

Another reason why concern with existentialism is waning is that theology is slowly awakening to its need for conversation with the dominant philosophy in Anglo-Saxon countries, that of linguistic analysis. During this century theologians have debated widely over the part, if any, that philosophy might play in theological thought. But a major irony of this debate is

that most theologians have ignored what is really happening in philosophy today. The philosophy to which theology has been related is not the philosophy that reigns today among philosophers.

It is not surprising that British theologians have led in opening the conversation with the linguistic analysts, since that philosophy has reigned there the longest. The book, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Flew and MacIntyre (London: S.C.M. Press, 1955), sets up some of the important issues. With it should be read the series of essays, *Faith and Logic*, edited by Basil Mitchell (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957). Since these pioneering works several books on the subject have appeared.

The dialogue with linguistic analysis is vital because it forces theology to ask about the nature of its language. Christianity is a faith which is under marching orders to communicate itself to the world. But we live in an age that is witnessing a crisis in communication. How, we must ask, can we use language to express the faith so that, on the one hand, it will be meaningful to the modern world and, on the other hand, it will not be false to the eternal Gospel? Theology which is concerned with the preaching of the Word cannot help profiting from a serious conversation with the philosophy that concentrates on how words behave.

But it is evident that the theologian who enters into conversation with linguistic analysis will have to operate differently from the philosophical theologians of the past. Linguistic analysis will not provide an apologetic for the faith; it has no natural theology to offer and will probably refute any natural theology that is attempted. This will make linguistic analysis seem quite uninteresting to theologians who have expected philosophy to help validate the Christian faith. But to theologians who believe that Christian faith comes with its own power to persuade the conversation can be most helpful.

An important theological development in recent years has been the continuing progress made in rediscovering the Reformers. In a real sense these studies have rescued the Reformers from both their friends and foes. T. F. Torrance's works are well known for their analysis of the Reformers, particularly Calvin. His book, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), is a good example. One of the finest of these studies remains Philip Watson's study of Luther, *Let God Be God* (London: Epworth Press, 1947). Through works like these, Luther and Calvin have emerged in their full power as thinkers. No longer are they read through the eyes of the Protestant orthodoxy that followed them. Seen in the light of these studies, their message for today seems strangely contemporary.

Inspired by the rediscovery of Luther and Calvin, a number of contemporary Methodists have been going back to rediscover John Wesley. *John Wesley's Theology Today*, by Colin Williams (New York-Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), and Franz Hildebrandt's works, *From Luther to Wesley* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1951) and *Christianity According to the Wesleys* (London: Epworth Press, 1956), are excellent examples of this rediscovery. It becomes evident that Wesley has suffered greatly from his admirers.

I was raised on the assertion that Wesley had no theology and that he taught a religion of experience alone, but it is now evident that Wesley was a powerful theologian. One wonders whether the talks leading to Church union in Canada might have been different and whether the Presbyterians who stayed out of the United Church of Canada might have felt differently had the Canadian Methodists understood Wesley better at that time. After all, Wesley himself confessed that he was only a "hairsbreadth from Calvinism."

During the past decade theology, particularly in the United States, has become concerned with the problem of cultural religion. Of course, this is not a new problem for Christians. As recently as the thirties Barth and the Confessional Church in Germany had to face cultural religion in the demonic form of German Christianity under Nazi auspices. In America cultural religion is not such an obviously demonic force, but it may be ultimately more dangerous because of the benign appearance which it bears. Several important studies have been made of this phenomenon in America. Some, like Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955), have been sociological studies with theological undertones. On the other hand, Martin Marty, *The New Shape of American Religion* (New York: Harper, 1959), is a profound theological critique of the cultural religion.

Cultural religion takes the form of religion for religion's sake. It embraces the primary social and cultural goals of society and gives to them a religious sanction. God is highly extolled but he is seen as the God who is unquestionably "on our side." Cultural religion refuses to face questions about the particular nature of God. Thus during the recent presidential election campaign a prominent American stated that it does not matter what a presidential candidate's religion is, "just so long as he believes in God." It was just such an attitude that led one perceptive observer to declare that the average American has a "fervent belief in the Great Whatever." In such an atmosphere anyone who tries to sharpen the concepts of our faith is sure to be chided with being divisive and intolerant. He will be told that it is fine to believe, but dangerous to proclaim boldly that we know in whom we have believed.

In the minds of many theologians this cultural religion is the greatest threat to Christian faith today. Communism is a more obvious enemy, but, precisely because it is so obvious, it is not so dangerous. Cultural religion infiltrates itself into our churches, it adopts the vocabulary of Christians, and how can you argue with it when it is obviously successful in filling the churches? There can be no doubt about the "success" of cultural religion; it has been a main factor in the revival of religion in the past decade. The source of its popularity is not far to seek. It promises man everything that his sinful heart desires; it proclaims that he has God's help in achieving what he already wants to achieve. It has nothing to say about taking up one's cross, it never mentions coming to love those things that we formerly hated and to hate those things that we formerly loved.

Despite her emphasis upon separation of church and state (or perhaps even because of it), America finds herself with a state religion today, as Marty makes clear. But the state religion bears only a dangerously misleading similarity to the biblical faith. This is a fact that contemporary theology is taking most seriously.

One of the greatest flurries in recent theological thought has been caused by Rudolph Bultmann's call to "demythologize" the *kerygma*. Although this storm broke in Germany during the war, it came to English-speaking countries somewhat later. *Kerygma and Myth*, edited by H. W. Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1953), is still the best introduction to it, although a large literature has arisen around the subject. Bultmann's own *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958) is a solid summary of his position. Essentially, Bultmann and his followers have been concerned with the problem of communicating the Gospel to the modern world and its scepticism. It is Bultmann's thesis that the modern man cannot accept the Gospel so long as it is clothed in the mythical form in which it is found in the Bible. Consequently, it must be "demythologized" and presented in an existential form, so that modern man can see what it means for him today. To do this Bultmann draws heavily on Heidegger's philosophy.

Some of Bultmann's points seem to be trivial. For example, he complains that we can no longer make sense out of phrases like "ascended into heaven" or "descended into hell," now that we no longer believe in a three-storied universe.⁶ One wonders if Bultmann has stopped speaking about the sun rising and setting, to conform to modern astronomy. But other questions are serious: for example, how can we preach a Gospel that is set in a framework of miracles, demons, and the Second Coming of Christ? Whether we agree with Bultmann or not, we must confess that there are real problems in communication to be faced in these areas.

It is difficult to say how strong Bultmann's following is today. There seems to have been no reliable poll taken of theologians on this matter. Some reports from Europe tell us that he is the most influential figure today in continental theology, but other reports tell us that the flurry is over and that Bultmann's theories have already been sent into eclipse. Certainly it is clear that some of his chief disciples are moving away from the master. In this country there are a number of Bultmannites, but there seems little evidence that they will form more than an interesting minority. Bultmann seems to have made little impression in Great Britain.

The debate that has raged around Bultmann has produced much heat, but less light than most theological debates. A major reason for this seems to have been Bultmann's failure to provide a consistent definition of what he means by "myth" and what a "demythologized" *kerygma* would be. Again, Bultmann is vague when he speaks of the "modern scientific view" which makes a "demythologizing" of the Bible necessary. Philosopher Karl

6. Bartsch, H. W. (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth*, translated by R. H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1954), p. 4.

Jaspers takes him to task at this point.⁷ As a result, although Bultmann has consistently denied it, he has been understood by many to lose the historicity of the Christian faith. As Gustaf Wingren puts it vividly, Bultmann's emphasis is so exclusively upon decision in the present that he has no concern with either the past or the future.⁸ Finally, Bultmann's strong reliance on the categories of Heidegger's philosophy has not proved to be an aid in communication. Few people claim to understand Heidegger, and those who do cannot agree about what he is really saying. It is significant that philosophers in Great Britain and America usually mention Heidegger only as an example of one who commits various logical blunders.

Although the "modern man" for whom Bultmann translates the Gospel may seem rather rare, it would be unfortunate if we failed to take Bultmann's questions seriously. A faith dedicated to preaching the Word cannot overlook the scandal that is often created by the way in which the Word is spoken. We will always carry this treasure in earthen vessels, but we ought to struggle to see that the earthen nature of the vessels does not become more of a hindrance than is necessary.

The work of Paul Tillich has continued to stimulate discussion in the United States. The secular press has come to refer to him as "America's leading theologian." During this past decade the first two volumes of his *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1957) have appeared and the third should be available by the time this article appears. Walter Leibrecht has written an excellent summary of Tillich's theology in a volume, *Religion and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1959), which he edited in honour of Tillich. Since retiring to Harvard University Tillich has caught the imagination of many college students.

On the whole Tillich's theology does not seem to have won too large a following. He seems to have had little influence on continental theology since he left Germany in the thirties, and when he gave the Gifford Lectures in Great Britain his reception was cool. His concentration upon ontology seems strange to those who share the prevailing moods in both theology and philosophy. Furthermore, his work has proved to be of such a nature that different readers or listeners come away with radically different views of what he has said. Naturalistic humanists and quite orthodox Christians are prepared to call Tillich their own. In view of the emphasis that Tillich has given to the importance of communication, it is ironical that there is no agreement upon what he has in fact said.

In recent years there has been a great interest in the unfinished theological work of the German martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Most of his works are now translated into English and at least one book, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, by John D. Godsey (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), has appeared to interpret his thought. Bonhoeffer's importance lies in the

7. Jaspers, K., and Bultmann, R., *Myth and Christianity* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1958), pp. 5ff.

8. Wingren, Gustaf, *Theology in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), p. 130.

fact that, while his theology is deeply Christocentric, he has shown an amazing ability to enter into the sceptical spirit of the modern world and to speak to it with real empathy. In fact, he finds that the godlessness of the modern world is, from the viewpoint of Christianity, a "hopeful godlessness."

Conservative theology has made a remarkable comeback during the past decade. After the fundamentalist-liberal controversy, fundamentalism became isolated from theological discussion. But in recent years an impressive group of younger conservatives has arisen. Although men like Carnell, Carl Henry, G. C. Berkouwer, and others, stand on much of the earlier fundamentalist platform, the wrathful attacks made upon them by the right-wing fundamentalists prove that they have struck a new note. They have made two interesting criticisms of contemporary Protestant trends. For one thing, they criticize the concept that God is revealed only in his mighty acts. Can we, they ask, have knowledge of God without revealed propositions and why cannot the Bible be seen as itself a mighty act of God? Secondly, they are critical of the tendency of Protestantism today to make the Church and its proclamation central instead of Christ.

In such a brief survey many important elements of contemporary theology have had to be ignored. For example, there is the modest but real development of a conversation between Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians. Again, there is the conversation between theology and psychotherapy. Or one might have said something about the increased attempts at producing a theology for the layman who is desirous of understanding his faith. But these and many other points must be bypassed here.

In summary, theology has been a busy and a growing activity since the second World War. It has many capable spokesmen and is dedicating itself to new and vital issues. It has its feet placed more firmly in the historical faith than was the case twenty or thirty years ago and, because this is so, it is able to speak more forthrightly to the world in which it finds itself. When Barth and other "crisis theologians" first made their protest, the situation was such that theology had to be primarily centred in the church and spoken to the church, for until the church had been called back to its faith it could not speak a saving word to the world. But now that that battle has largely been won, there is an opportunity to look to the second task of theology—conversation with the world to which it seeks to preach the Gospel.