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British Theology To-day

BY THE REV. G. H. G. HEWITT, M.A.

IN her recent and entertaining volume of *Unpopular Opinions* Miss Dorothy Sayers recalls someone's remark that "Britain possesses no climate, only weather." This comment may be applied, with some measure of truth, to British theology. Like British weather, it exhibits a multitude of mild varieties, but few extremes. Even about the varieties it is most difficult to generalise, for there are no obvious denominational or regional patterns. Oxford, Cambridge and St. Andrew's do not foster homogeneous "schools" whose theological systems can be compared and contrasted, and it is not unusual to find writers of a single denomination holding widely divergent views on the doctrine of the Church. The comment "no climate, only weather" would appear to be justified.

Fortunately, although it contains a measure of truth, the comment is not wholly justified. Beneath the apparent profusion of theological view-points, beneath the dancing waves of surface opinions, it is possible to discern a steady current which gives some coherence to the whole. It is not easy to define this current, and one must beware of laying a too exclusive stress on the evidence of published books. The recurrent unconscious phraseology of articles in periodicals may prove more valuable as clues than their reasoned arguments. One may learn more about what is happening from casual table-talk, or from the prayers chosen to follow the third collect, than from large and learned tomes. In speaking of the importance of these secondary sources, one may perhaps be pardoned for mentioning a final source upon which this essay relies a good deal—namely, the daily post-bag of manuscripts on a religious book-editor's table. Inevitably, under present conditions, the majority of these manuscripts never see the light of print, as often as not because they run one idea to death; and for that very reason they are important as evidence. The rejected manuscript, lacking the weight and balance of the published work, bears witness reliably to the drift of theological thought.

From all these sources, then, comes evidence of something more than "weather" in contemporary British theology, something approximate to a "climate" of thought which makes it possible for Anglican and Free Churchman, the writer of the doctorate thesis and of the popular pamphlet, to speak with a common voice on at least some of the great issues of Christian theology. One of the primary factors behind the development of a synthetic rather than a piecemeal theology is a growing consensus of opinion as to what theology is, whence it is derived, and what purposes it is meant to serve. When men can agree upon the nature of their common task they have already moved a long way towards a harmonious fulfilment of it. So it will be well to sketch an outline of this agreement before proceeding to specific issues.

I.

It runs something like this. Theology is the *study of God*, not simply of men's thoughts about God. Its subject-matter is Revelation and Grace—what God says and what He does. Theology is thus distinguished from Christian philosophy on the one hand and from the history of Christian doctrine on the other. As a science, it has its own methods of working and canons of reference dictated by its peculiar subject-matter. Demonstration and proof mean a different thing for the theologian and for the natural scientist. Theology stands apart from, and above, all other studies and sciences. Exiled or on the throne, theology remains Queen in the *universitas* of knowledge.

With such high conceptions of the dignity of his calling, the typical theologian of to-day is bolder than his immediate predecessors, though he conceives his task more narrowly. He is concerned only with the central issues of the Faith.¹ He writes and preaches with a new note of authority, and if at times he lays himself open to the sin of pride, claiming as final truth the constructions of his finite mind, he is nearer than some of his fathers were to the place where sin, once atoned for, may be confessed and forgiven. He stands before the world, and in the Church, as a committed man, conscious of his commitment, and his blinkers are those of his own choosing.

Together with this widespread agreement about the nature of the theologian's task one can discern agreement about method. There has been a good deal of discussion about method in contemporary theological writing, but two typical quotations will suffice. The Rev. G. O. Griffith puts the matter succinctly in a recent article: "By theology, as used in its Christian signification, we mean that systematic interpretation of Divine truth whose *subject* is the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and whose *method* is the exposition of Scripture."² Canon A. M. Ramsey spoke to the same effect in his inaugural lecture in the University of Durham in 1940.³ "Our classes in doctrine will have the Bible at hand, not with a view to proof-texts nor with a view to curtailing the riches of dogmatics and philosophy, but because the Biblical idea of Revelation and Redemption will be the centre. Revelation, so we learn from the Bible, is not the utterance by God of propositions for the human mind, but the redemptive action of a Person understood and received through the response of man's entire personality to Him. It is, therefore, the unity, not only of the New Testament, but of all theological study that matters greatly." Canon Ramsey writes specifically of method in teaching theology, but his words have a wider reference. The most remarkable, and surely the most heartening feature, of much contemporary theology (British and otherwise) is its *Bible-centredness*.

Unfortunately, together with this genuine concern to draw theology out of Holy Scripture, to listen first to what the Bible has to say,

¹ For the dangers implicit in this limited conception of the theologian's task, see e.g. Leonard Hodgson's *Towards a Christian Philosophy*, or C. J. Cadoux's article "Scripture and Theology" in the *Congregational Quarterly*, January, 1947.

² "Is there a Natural Theology?" in *The Christian World*, January 16, 1947.

³ *Theology Occasional Papers*, New Series, No. 3.

there is to be found a certain amount of bogus Biblicism, which bypasses the discipline of historical and textual study, and finds in the Bible what all along it intended to find.

Again, although there is a widespread repudiation of the presuppositions of philosophic liberalism, there is (in the kind of thought we are describing) no similar repudiation of the main positions of higher and lower criticism as worked out in the last hundred years. For instance, Torrey's early dating of the Synoptic Gospels, and Engnell's "Tetrateuchal" hypothesis have been passed over almost unnoticed by contemporary Biblical scholarship in this country. Professor Dodd is surely right in suggesting that "post-liberal" is a more accurate description than "post-critical" for the typical Biblical studies of to-day.

What is heartening in this movement of theological thought is the widespread recognition of certain basic Biblical concepts—revelation and atonement, sin and grace, forgiveness and new birth—as the given subject-matter of theology. The *whole* Bible matters to the theologian. His task is not to speculate in an unchartered field concerning the ways of God to man, but to interpret, and to hand over to the Church, the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ, to which all Scripture bears witness. The spate of books on the Old Testament published in this country since 1939 is evidence of this new temper in theological writing. The problems of the relation of the two Testaments and the nature of Biblical authority are being energetically tackled.

II.

We must proceed now to a statement of these emphases which may, with some risk, be taken as typical of the main current of contemporary theology, in this country.¹ Attention will be focussed on what is new in this generation compared with the theological thought of a generation ago. The use of the adjective "new" does not, of course, imply lack of ancestry. Some of these points of emphasis may properly be claimed as genuine rediscoveries of the insights of the primitive Christian Church or of the great traditions of the Reformation. Others can be traced back with more certainty to men like F. D. Maurice, P. T. Forsyth and von Hügel. Others have more obvious affinity with the thought of contemporary continental theologians such as Karl Heim, Althaus, Aulen, Brunner and Barth. None of them, it can be safely said, are peculiarly British insights. What is novel about them, and what gives them a rightful prominence in this survey of British theology, is their increasingly wide acceptance in this country to-day.

(1) First, then, there is a new emphasis on the *transcendence of God*. Otto's phrase "wholly other", Barth's "God is always Subject", Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative difference between God and man" are widely and frequently quoted. We only know God in so far as He makes Himself known. God is not man raised to the n'th

¹ Readers of *The Church Quarterly Review* will know how much I am indebted, here and elsewhere in this essay, to Principal William Robinson's article "Dogma, Theology and History" which appeared in that journal in October, 1945.

power of perfection but *other* than man. By His sovereign act of will, fellowship between Himself and man is made possible. The question whether there is any "point of contact" between God and man, hotly debated by Barth and Brunner in two famous pamphlets,¹ has not been given much prominence in this country, but perhaps the recently published translations of these pamphlets will focus attention upon it. Brunner's general position is more congenial to our ways of thought, though his precise formulation of it may not appeal. The issue depends on the precise meaning given to the Incarnation. Anselm's question: "Cur Deus Homo?" is once again a live issue in contemporary theology.

(2) There is a new emphasis on the *Word of God* with stress on the fact that it is an *acted* Word rather than a spoken Word. The phrase "the mighty acts of God" makes the point so well that it has become almost wearisome in its constant reiteration. Professor Leonard Hodgson's book, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, has done much to establish and popularise another key-phrase: "Revelation, not in proposition but in act." The Word of God, on this view, is not primarily the imparting of information but the revelation of character in action. God acts, and so we know Him. Revelation is by its very nature unique: for it is God showing Himself as He is. Revelation and redemption are not to be separated since God, in one and the same act, reveals Himself as Redeemer.

(3) A new emphasis on *the Church as the Israel of God*. Those who speak of a revolution in Protestant theology are on surest ground here. The doctrine of the Church has been moved with startling rapidity from the periphery to the centre of theological interest. Not only have many books been written on the subject, but the typical Protestant of to-day uses the term "Church" with a confidence which has quite replaced the reserve apparent in the sermons and books of a generation ago. The Church has been rediscovered as one of the great themes of the Bible and integral to the Gospel of Salvation. Might one dare to call this emphasis on the Church the recovery of a neglected dimension in Protestant theology? Luther and Calvin did not neglect it, nor our own Evangelical Fathers, such as Charles Simeon. In this recovery of a neglected emphasis we must expect to find crude overstatements; the danger of a barren ecclesiasticism is as real as a false Biblicism. The essential safeguard to such overstatements is a firm grasp of eschatology.

(4) A new emphasis upon *history and eschatology*. History is seen as the process of salvation in which God acts continually and decisively to bring fallen humanity home. History is God's workshop. God has created it, and He will put an end to it when its work is done. World history centres upon, and derives its meaning from, that "Sacred History" which the Bible records and interprets. "It (Christianity) takes the series of events recorded or reflected in the Bible, from the call of Abraham to the emergence of the Church, and declares that in this series the ultimate reality of all history which is the purpose of God, is finally revealed, because the series is itself controlled by the

¹ Brunner's *Natur und Gnade* and Barth's *Nein!*, translated by Peter Fraenkel under the title *Natural Religion*, Bles, 1946.

supreme event of all—the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This valuation of the series is not imposed upon it from without, but is an integral part of the history itself.”¹

(5) A new understanding of *faith*, not as an assent to certain propositions about God’s nature but as the response of the whole personality to God’s action in history. Faith is not a “resolve to stand or fall by the noblest hypothesis” but a continuing dependence upon the Word of God. A contemporary Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, and a Danish thinker of a century ago, Soren Kierkegaard, have provided much-quoted key-phrases for this understanding of faith—“the I—Thou relationship” and the “doctrine of the leap.” Truth is conceived of, not primarily as the deposit of assured knowledge, but rather as the product of the “personal encounter” in which God meets man. Out of such “moments,” in which man knows his whole existence to be at stake, faith is born and renewed.

(6) A new understanding of *Christian ethics*. Righteousness is thought of, less in terms of “virtues” embodying certain “values” and more in terms of a total response to God’s election into fellowship with Himself. Man’s proper nature is determined in the light of his appointed destiny. A type of casuistry is being developed which deals not so much with isolated “hard cases” but with “total situations” in which the Christian man finds himself in a non-Christian world. The problem as to whether the New Testament ethic is of “interim” or “final” validity has yielded pride of place to the problem of the relation between “Gospel-righteousness” and life within “the orders of creation” or under “common grace.” It is significant, for instance, that the Christian Frontier is concerned to find a substitute for the “Nonconformist Conscience” which puts Christian responsibility in more positive and realistic terms.

III.

Two large questions remain to be answered. First, Are these points of emphasis distinctively British? Second, Do they truly represent the main current of contemporary theological thought in this country?

The first question can be briefly answered in the negative. There is nothing distinctively British about them except the manner of their presentation. The temper of British theology is synthetic rather than dogmatic; it is reluctant to push an idea to its logical conclusion; it is apt at discovering the truth at both extremes. Whether we call it smugness or sweet reasonableness, moderation or timidity; whether it is a result of our climate or due to some deeper cause, this temper is evident in most of our theological writing. The history of the Church in Britain records many great interpreters but few original thinkers. An unkind critic has said that our only original thinker was Pelagius! It is unfortunate that this British moderation has been taken to mean that British theology inevitably lacks direction. Caution and movement are quite compatible.

The larger question, however, remains. Is the type of theology described above truly representative of British theological thinking to-day? One recent observer suggests that it is far from represen-

¹ C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel*, p. 30.

tative. "The general working theology of the Church in Britain," he suggests, "is Platonist and idealist, religious rather than Christian, wedded to natural theology and a false apologetic."¹ That is a formidable counter-suggestion and the reader must be left in the end to arbitrate between us, but a word or two may be said by way of comment. Judged by the published works of men like Dodd, Quick, Farmer, Baillie, Micklem and Whale, Mr. Miller's picture is hardly recognisable even in terms of caricature. The picture is even harder to identify in writings of the second grade. The great books may reflect and comment upon the passing fashions of thought, but they are not bound by them. The lesser books indicate the current more accurately just because of their more limited vision and, from a fairly wide acquaintance, I would suggest that what they indicate is what I have attempted to describe and not what Mr. Miller describes. One must assume, therefore, that when he speaks of "*working* theology" he has in mind the preacher's word from the average British pulpit, and the sentiments expressed by the average "man in the pew"—almost to the exclusion of any published books.

Now this is a fair test and a right test, if reasonable allowance is made for the time-lag in the dissemination of ideas; and Mr. Miller's judgment constitutes a challenge to all who are concerned with the theological education of our churches. One of the more disturbing features of our time is the lack of books which hand over, in simple language, to the ordinary believer, the key-thoughts of the best contemporary scholarship. The great majority of books, including most of those wistfully commended to "the intelligent layman," presuppose a university course in theology which few laymen enjoy. The ordinary church member is thus often left to choose between sentimental books of devotion which have no theological meat in them, or "meaty" books which employ language and thought-forms which make no contact with his mind.

There can be no easy solution to this problem, but real efforts are being made to solve it. Charles Williams, Dorothy Sayers, and C. S. Lewis have pointed the way to a confident and resourceful apologetic, and the "Signpost" and "Forward" books and "The St. Paul's Library" have been notable attempts at handing over a consistent theology to a particular Christian constituency; but there are many levels as yet almost untouched. It is at best premature to speak of a theological revival in our churches until this work of dissemination is carried through more effectively. One fairly safe test as to whether a theology has got home to the Church is the output of new hymns,² and there has been no significant hymn-writing since Scott Holland and Chesterton, though the need is urgently felt and recent competitions may produce interesting results. Another

¹ Alexander Miller, "*British Christianity: A Survey and a Critique*," *Theology To-day*, 1946.

² The value of this test is vitiated by the archeological form taken by the liturgical revival in many churches, but even new translations of ancient Latin hymns would be important as evidence.

³ E.g. the competition for a marriage hymn organised by *The Parson* and for a missionary hymn by the C.M.S.

test of a "working" theology is to be seen in the quality of Christian pamphleteering. Here again there are signs of movement, but the popular literature of rationalism, hoary with ancient arguments, still goes almost unchallenged.

There is much still to be done, then, before we can speak of a theological revival, but signs are not wanting that the ground is being prepared. Enough has happened to make it increasingly difficult to regard theology as the private undertaking of a few intellectuals, irrelevant to the worship and witness of the Church. We are being compelled to understand theology once again in its traditional meaning as a form of the Church's witness to the Gospel. Its task is to preserve and to hand over to the faithful the fulness of the faith once delivered, in the language and thought-forms appropriate to contemporary need. If the numerous theological societies formed in recent years hold fast to this conception of their task, we may look forward with hope.

A NOTE ON BOOKS

A survey of this kind would be incomplete without a book list, and it would seem best to mention three or four books on each of the main points touched upon. This has been attempted with real misgiving, for the choice is bound to be coloured by one's own enthusiasms and limited by one's own reading. All that can be claimed for the list is that it represents an honest attempt to give a fair cross-section of British theological writing to-day.

THE THEOLOGIAN AND HIS JOB.

- K. E. Kirk (ed.), *The Study of Theology*. Hodder and Stoughton.
 John Baillie, *The Interpretation of Religion*. T. and T. Clark.
 Marcus Ward, *Our Theological Task*. C. L. S. Madras.

THE THEOLOGIAN AND THE BIBLE.

- C. H. Dodd, *The Bible To-day*. C.U.P.
 H. Cunliffe-Jones, *The Authority of the Biblical Revelation*. James Clarke.
 N. H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*. Epworth Press.
 A. Richardson, *A Preface to Bible Study*. S.C.M. Press.

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD.

- J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine*. C.U.P.
 J. Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*. C.U.P.
 O. C. Quick, *The Doctrines of the Creed*. Nisbet.

THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION.

- Baillie and Martin, *Revelation*. S.C.M. Press.
 Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*. Nisbet.
 H. Wheeler Robinson, *Redemption and Revelation*. Nisbet.
 A. L. Lilley, *Religion and Revelation*. S.P.C.K.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH.

- D. T. Jenkins, *The Nature of Catholicity*. Faber.
 A. G. Herbert, *The Form of the Church*. Faber.
 F. J. Taylor, *The Church of God*. Canterbury Press.

HISTORY AND ESCHATOLOGY.

- C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel*. Nisbet.
 O. C. Quick, *The Gospel of the New World*. Nisbet.
 M. A. C. Warren, *The Calling of God*. Lutterworth Press.
 H. G. Wood, *Christianity and the Nature of History*. C.U.P.

FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE.

- D. T. Jenkins, *Prayer and the Service of God*. Faber.
 H. Lovell Cocks, *By Faith Alone*. James Clarke.

CHRISTIAN LIVING IN A NON-CHRISTIAN WORLD.

- C. S. Lewis, *Christian Behaviour*. Bles.
 T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*. Faber.
 A. D. Lindsay, *The Two Moralities*. Eyre and Spottiswoode.