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COMMENT

KARL BARTH

We are nearing to the end of the year and its seems appropriate to say something corresponding to the season. We ought to speak about Christmas and the New Year. But what can we say about these things? The subject is well used and I am too afraid of wearying my readers. So why not speak about a man who has died last spring and who was probably the greatest Swiss of this century, Karl Barth. The time seems highly appropriate for a short review on the most important aspect of his work.

Karl Barth was a theologian. Now theology is not a household discipline and that is why the impact of the revolution he brought about was not as universally felt as say, the breakthroughs of Pasteur or Einstein. "Breakthrough" is the convenient word to use because it denotes a jump ahead of a stagnant intellectual situation, where knowledge couldn't progress without the discovery of a vital missing link. In the case of Pasteur, it was the germs, in the case of Einstein it was the notion of physical relativity. What was the breakthrough achieved by Barth?

At the beginning of the century, when Karl Barth was studying theology, the attitude in Christian thinking was to emulate the experimental sciences. The ideal of the day was to strive towards a scientific Christianity so that belief could be acquired without logical or intellectual strain. This ideal, inherited from the rennaissance, the "siècle des lumières" and 19th century positivism, sought to found Christianity in human nature and used for this the tools of historical criticism and psychology.

Historical scholars discovered that religions had existed all over the world at all times, that they all had common traits and that the Judeo-Christian religion possessed a great many of them. It was thus concluded that Christianity was just another religion. Christ was aligned in the gallery of other great teachers: Buddha, Confucius, Mahomet and the others, his message being essentially one of wisdom, showing the right way to live.

Psychologists on the other hand pointed out that men had ideals, loved goodness, fidelity and the good life. The Church used these human attributes to infer the existence of God and prove the relevance of religion. Religion became a kind of channel for the expression of these ideals, a human paen to the beauties of life and the greatness of God, but not, as Barth discovered, a hymn to God himself.

This understanding of religion, called "liberalism", leads, with its varying puritanical or pietist overtones, to the familiar misconception of Christianity as a muscular exercise or a promoter of honeysuckle personalities, as a discipline to thrilling religious experiences, as a disguised nationalism leading to a "Gott mit Uns" philosophy. All this of course is why the church has been at a low ebb for the past forty years. The traditional image which it conjured up was repellent to modern man. They saw in the church something essentially moralistic, Victorian, and sensed the inauthenticity of many of its proponents.

Barth found that out some fifty years ago. To understand the leap which he had to make, one must remember that he was bred in liberalism and actually contributed to the liberal review "Christliche Welt". It was only during his retreat as minister of a small country parish (his first job) that he had the opportunity and the peace to question his liberalistic beliefs. He searched the Bible and reflected on its Message. His meditations lead to an epoch-making work, his commentary of the Letter to the Romans, which received a noisy and controversial reception, but which in fact was the kick-off to an authentic theological revolution.

Barth's overwhelming contribution to Christian thinking was to reinstate the Mystery of God; to place God back to where He belonged, outside the frontiers of man's understanding.

For a start, he rejected historical and psychological apologetics as a means to reach God. To prove God through history and psychology is to him a particularly fragile endeavour, as the atheists have counterarguments which are just as good. What is worse is that, in inferring God from man in nature and history, the liberalist makes man the measure of all things. Whatever his conclusions, God will be man's creation, a human projection, or no more than an hypothesis. Not only is the method logically untenable, but it is irrelevant because God is not found, but only his dream or his human image. In the same vein, Barth rejects the use of psychology in the quest of God (and we may safely assume that he considered Jung's four-sided God as an amusing curiosity). God is above and beyond the psychism of man and one cannot find him because one is blessed with strong religious drives, which are as accidental as strong sexual or ambitious drives. Nor can God be pin-pointed for life's practical purposes only because there is a sudden and tremendous need of him, in the same way that a man lost in a desert will not find an oasis just because he is dying of thirst. What Barth really does, and with shattering ruthlessness, is to assert the essential difference between religion and faith. Religion is human. To be religious one does not even require the existence of a God. Faith on the other hand is independent of human contingencies and entirely dependent on the real presence of God.

Having scathed the Christian religion as a masqueraded faith so badly, what does Barth say about the real thing?

He describes his understanding of faith in the first three chapters of a short book called "Dogmatik in Grundriss" and we shall try to resume their contents.

To begin with, faith is not a psychological phenomenon and necessarily (certainly not primarily) linked in any way with a "religious experience". The tremor of feelings is completely secondary to the primordial reality of faith. Nor is faith the crowning of a great effort: all human efforts can reach are intuitions of God, of order, of finality, but not God himself.

Faith *comes* to a man through a *revelation* of God himself. What was hidden becomes revealed. Barth says that a man cannot acquire faith but only receive it, without any personal preparation, but through God's free loving will. The man who is struck by this revelation is faced with an overwhelming Reality from which he cannot hide and which produces a deep change in his life. He who has had faith once will have it all his life. This faith may slump if it is neglected and not treated like a beautiful gift, but it remains ever present because it has left an indelible mark. For Barth, a lapsed Christian was never a real Christian.

Psychologically, faith is experienced as an absolute and ineffable certainty that "God is there for me and loves me, that I am here on earth for him". This certainty, which is of a supernatural order because it is not the product of any reasoning or effort, illuminates life and gives a peace "which surpasses

understanding". The Christian can live in entire confidence in the One that has made himself known, whose exigencies he has learnt to love, There is a shift from a self-centred struggle for life and objects to a God-centred obedience throughout life and a grateful receptivity to what it has to offer.

Barth contends that faith is not irrational or supra-rational. Correctly understood, it is perfectly rational. Theology is a rational and exact science because it has its experimental fact: God. Not a reproducible laboratory fact, true. The arrival of God is not a possibility that can be discussed: it remains forever a mystery to man. But he *does* exist and millions of Christians have known and experienced him. The necessary "experimental fact" is present in every day of their lives: they don't have to try and prove it, it's there! Theology's work is not to prove the existence of God since that is the assumption on which it rests! Its ploy begins once God has been revealed and received. Faith is more than an inexplicable confidence, it is new understanding of life, a new *knowledge*. One has *grasped* something and realised that the meaning of one's life is contained in this new vision and nowhere else. One *knows* what the whole universe is all about. But this knowledge is not descriptive: one just knows. In the same way, knowledge of God is not a descriptive knowledge. What can be described and understood belongs to the earth. God is the "All Other" completely outside the grasp of our rational and utilitarian intelligences. His knowledge can only be received in rather the same way that the true knowledge of another *person,* neither describable or possessable, can only be received.

Barth, as we can see, is rather rough on the seekers. He tells them from the start that all their efforts towards faith are vain and that they must wait on God's good will. This sounds like frightful predestination! No recipes for faith are contained in these chapters. Still, this is hardly surprising since all that can be acquired through a recipe must be a "possessible" thing: objects and human situations. God is well outside this realm.

Although Barth does not give any precise indication of what the seeker must do, he does give hints to the answer in many of his assertions. He says, for instance, that the men who became Christ's disciples were at one crucial moment in their lives in a *position* where they could believe. In another passage, Barth says that there is a powerful tendency in man to reject God's grace, which in the particular context may be understood to mean the world and God himself as a loving gift not to be "had" but received. The implication is that as a man's life unweaves, there are always circumstances where he may catch a glimpse of the truth of God, but that he is prevented by a powerful ego-centred wish of doing everything by himself. Barth also speaks of the anxiety caused by man's vision of the ugliness of life, which prevents him from even wanting to believe in the goodness of God. As it were, he is shut up in himself and refuses to see the sun. Therefore the only "recipe" that can be implied from Barth's understanding of faith is to be "actively passive", or to divest oneself of all the false Gods and self-designed spiritualities to clear the void which man can at last discover in himself, and let it be filled with God's presence. What Barth encourages his readers to do is to revert to the state of "little children" or "poor in spirit". This is the essential first step, the rest depending on God's grace. Being "little children" is in fact to adapt to the order of the universe. Beyond our villages, there are a million trillion stars; next to our families, there are three billion men. Faced with this reality, there is logically little alternative to becoming "poor in spirit".

God is not describable and the Bible never attempts to picture him. Quite on the contrary, heathen images are proscribed throughout the history of the Hebrew people. What is available to man is only to see what God has done in the Scriptures. The Bible, this document of God's action in the world, is essential to true Christian faith. Knowing God is in fact "knowing Jesus-Christ", and there is no other first-step in doing so than to read of his works and teachings in the Gospels.

Unfortunately, we cannot talk of Barth's understanding of the "Word of God", since this will carry us too far. Let us just say that Barth understands the Bible as a human book expressing humanity as well as the reality of God. The act of reading the Bible is not in itself a guarantee that "faith will come", but it is certainly true that the physical words of Christ are the latchspring to the entry in God's realm. It is only then, when one has faith, that the Bible means more than an ordinary book. But in the meanwhile Barth tells his reader to take the Book *seriously* and therefore acknowledge his helplessness. That is his only responsibility, the rest is God's.

Barth has touched off an extremely fruitful development of Protestant theology. In many cases he has been overtaken, even contradicted by equally great thinkers. Some of his work is presently in disrepute because it systematically ignores some realities of present-day mentality, namely, that men can't make the immense jump to faith without some rational persuasion. Barth's attitude of placing theology above science goes against our times, which are still liberalistically-minded. People want a language which they can understand and Barth is a rather voluminous writer not always clear in his exposition. But the fact remains that, in European theology, liberalism is definitely dead thanks to his pioneering action. This being, the serious modern theologians agree with him on the essentials.

(*PMB*)

SWISS NEWS

THE FUTURE OF THE LUCENS NUCLEAR REACTOR

The future of Switzerland's ill-fated first nuclear reactor has been the theme of an informative press conference. A spokesman for the National Society for Nuclear Energy explained that the purpose of the Lucens reactor had been to develop a prototype of power-reactor to be subsequently used on an industrial scale. It had been half financed by the Confederation, the rest coming from the cantons. The technicians at Lucens had known that an accident could happen but they were never in the position of saying exactly when. In the course of the reactors' life, industry had shown a diminishing interest for its practical possibilities.

After the accident that definitely halted its operation in January, it was necessary to decide what to do with the hewn-in cavern and the installations of Lucens. Following an expertise, it was found that the only possible solution was to create a national storehouse of radioactive wastes.

Stocking the rejects of atomic reactors presented no dangers for Lucens because every precaution had been taken. There were at present great amounts of radioactive wastes still lying in the cavern because they could not be taken out. The best idea was to leave them there and complete them with other wastes from the rest of the country. They could remain there from twelve to twenty years. There were various ways of eliminating radioactive wastes, but Switzerland did not possess any deserts in which to dump them, like the United States.

The frights of the inhabitants of Lucens had no real foundation and were primarily psychological. The villagers' fears that the presence of radioactive wastes in their commune would be a hindrance to tourism was unjustified. Strongly shaken by the failure of their reactor, they had initially opposed very strongly its transformation into a national nuclear dumping-house.

TWO NEW ELECTIONS IN PARLIAMENT

The State Council has elected Mr. Paul Torche, Christian-Social Conservative from Fribourg, as its President for 1970. He is 57 and has already been president of the State Council of the Canton of Fribourg six times.

The National Council has elected its present vice-president, Mr. Mathias Eggenberger, Socialist from St. Gall, as its president for the coming year. Mr. Eggenberger is 64.

(*ATS*)