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Barth's Critique of Modernism

GORDON H. CLARK

Karl Barth's theological education was that of a typical liberal. But early in his career he turned against modernism and became a leader in a new type of thought.

The chief and summary accusation Barth made against liberal theology was that it substituted man for God. Such a substitution entailed a particular notion of God, but also a particular notion of man; and Barth centered his attack on the notion of man. To explain Barth's thought, it is necessary to grasp the motivation behind liberal theology.

From the time of his studies with Hermann, Barth regarded Schleiermacher as the greatest theological figure of the nineteenth century, and not without reason. Convinced of the value of Christianity, Schleiermacher wished to defend it against the onslaughts of the Enlightenment. At the same time he considered himself a modern man. The values of Christianity therefore must in some way be integrated with the advances of science and culture. To do so, he identified the kingdom of God with the progress of civilization. His theology borrowed its principles from contemporary science. Theology must be founded on a philosophy of religion, and echoing Kant, he founded religion on ethics. With a mixture of Kant and romanticism, Schleiermacher's theology arises in a subjective feeling of total dependence. The Word, or intellectual truth, is a secondary matter. It is in feeling, in experience, in conduct that man has some sort of relation with God.

THE ERRORS OF MODERNISM

For modernism the method of theology consists in taking the Church and its faith as part of the wider context of civilization in general. Dogmatics, in this view, derives its structure and its norms from the general laws of society and the universe. Therefore Schleiermacher—and on this point Bultmann still follows him—first shows the general anthropological possibility of faith, and then second, its historico-psychological realizability. As a result theology depends on borrowings from metaphysics, anthropology, ethics, and the philosophy of religion. Since by searching man *can* find God, a special revelation is unnecessary.

Barth in an interesting way notes the effect of modernism on the weekly sermon. It must not be thought that technical theories of theology have no repercussions in the daily life of the Church and its ministers. Modernistic anthropology produces a specific type of sermon

For the modernist minister the sermon topic is tested philosophically for its epistemological, cosmic, or psychological content; or perhaps for its historical, political, or social content. Modernist preaching has no lack or criteria—all substitutes for the missing criterion of the Word of God. Modernism in its own way was concerned for the Church and wished to preserve the essential values of Christianity while discarding the historical husks. It had therefore its dogmatics. But it has lost the Reformation's criterion. When, then, other criteria were seized upon to fill the empty place, these were regarded as a full and equal substitute, in a measure representing what had been lost. The theology of modernistic Protestantism has

ceased to envisage any possibility of getting within sight of the Word of God as an entity distinct from Church proclamation. But this means that the modernist preacher is not preaching God; he is only preaching himself. He has put himself in the place of God. As Harnack very frankly told Barth in a conversation, the older dogmatics ought to be replaced by a personal confession of one who has attained the maturity and serenity of final convictions and spiritual certainties.

MAN-CENTERED RELIGION

The point therefore at which Barth most obviously conflicts with modernism is anthropology. Does man or does he not have the natural ability to find out God by searching? The essential humanism of liberal theology can best be seen in its view of human nature. One of the tasks Schleiermacher set for himself was the defense of Christianity against the onslaughts of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment had affected a supercilious disdain of history. Antiquity was spurned as all confusion and superstition. Against this contempt of history the liberals expressed a respect for history. The great men of antiquity, Jeremiah and Jesus, Paul and Luther, are our fellowmen; they have a common human nature. To be sure, as the Enlightenment too vigorously insisted, we must criticize them from our higher vantage point; but we must also esteem them as our comrades in our great endeavors. Thus by studying history appreciatively we may come to discern God's revelation. History thus proves its truth to us as we come to experience and feel the truth in ourselves. Lessing in particular held that the inner truth of history is an entity thoroughly accessible to and apprehensible by us; as to its presence we can be the judges in virtue of our feeling and experience. Therefore he appeals from Luther's writing to Luther's spirit, from the letter to the spirit of the Bible, from the recounted miracles to constantly continuing miracles of religion itself. Thus Lessing asserted an immanent power in human nature by which is discerned the coincidence of revelation and history.

In a later section Barth puts the problem more explicitly. Are we to assert without reservation, he asks, that the question of the possibility of knowing the Word of God is a question of anthropology? Are we to enquire into what man in general and as such is or is not capable of in this respect? Is there a general truth with regard to man which would include his capacity for knowing the Word of God? We must put this question, says Barth, because an almost overwhelming development in the history of Protestant theology since the Reformation has led to an impressive affirmative answer throughout the entire movement described as modernist. Barth then traces a little post-reformation history. In its aversion from the scholastic *nuda speculatio de Deo*, post-reformation theology sided with Duns Scotus in regarding theology as a practical science and not as a theoretical science as Thomas had maintained. The object of theology was no longer the nature and will of God, but rather man in so far as he is led toward eternal blessedness. Turretin was perhaps exceptionally clear-sighted and was suspicious of such definitions. To guard against undesirable inferences he insisted that even so theology was concerned with God, God as revealed in Christ. But others did not see so clearly as Turretin. From the outset, Barth maintains, Protestant orthodoxy suffered from an excess rather than a defect in considering the religious subject. Under the influence of Renaissance interests, the later theologians began to shift their attention from a Supreme Being to man himself. The object, man, was then supposed to be understood through the general truths of anthropology, empirically discovered. Simultaneously natural theology revived, as the misgivings of the Reformers in this connection faded. By the eighteenth century theology had become the "science of religion." Schleiermacher quite fundamentally

connected this newly-discovered and independent reality of religion with a corresponding human possibility generally demonstrable on anthropological grounds, undertaking for the first time to interpret Christianity in the form of a concretely historical analysis of human existence along the lines of a general doctrine of man: to wit, man's meeting with God to be regarded as a human religious experience historically and psychologically fixable; and this experience to be regarded as the realization of a religious potentiality in man generally demonstrable. These are the two cardinal propositions in the philosophy of religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The decisive one is naturally the second; to repeat, experience with God to be regarded as the realization of a religious potentiality in man generally demonstrable. Whether the actual anthropology adopted is that of Schleiermacher, or one more congenial to contemporary consciousness, like that of Heidegger adopted by Bultmann, the result is still humanistic liberalism.

NEW STRESS ON REVELATION

In this way Barth has shown that modernism is man-centered. Man's knowledge of God, which upon examination turns out to be knowledge of himself, arises out of the ordinary resources of human nature. Barth's thought, on the contrary, is God-centered, and the following material will explain his quite different epistemology. How can man come to know God? Barth's answer is no analysis of the universe, history, or the human spirit. Barth's answer is revelation.

The simplicity of revealed reality is not that of a repeated or general event like that of an event formulated in the law of causality. It is the simplicity, says Barth, of a definite, temporally-limited, unrepeated, and quite unrepeatable event. There is no anticipation or repetition of this event. The reality of revelation is not a determination of all history or of a part or section of history. It is history, this very definite history, which has not happened before and will never happen again, which happened one for all, not once in every age or once in many, but quite literally once for all.

An important implication of Barth's stress on divine relation is his reversal of the modernistic conception of possibility and actuality. The liberal position is that we must judge the limits of divine revelation on the basis of what we determine to be possible on other grounds. A popular example is the account of I Samuel 15:3 where the author says that God commanded the extermination of the Amalekites. The modernist insists that this cannot have been a divine command because we know from our independent study of ethics that God could not possibly have given this command. Barth does not use this example, but his reply covers it. He says we must not desire to know *a priori* what goodness is, or to grumble if the world does not conform to it.

In his magnum opus Barth considers the concept of possibility in several different sections. He repeatedly condemns the liberalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the ground that it measured the actuality of divine revelation according to concepts of possibility that were no more than human constructs. By an examination of man's own needs, the liberal theologian decided what God could and must do. His faith therefore was based on the cunning conclusion that God has made out his case in accordance with our well-founded convictions. The basic difference between this liberal theology and the theology of the older Protestantism is that from some source or other, from some general knowledge of God and man, it is known beforehand, known *a priori*, what revelation must be, may be, and ought to

be. But if a man grounds his recognition of revelation on such a human norm, says Barth, then what he recognizes has nothing to do with God's revelation.

Barth's argument is penetrating and the problem is profound. How can a man measure the limits of possibility? How can man predict what God will do? Are we to limit God's possibilities by our studies in science or ethics? Such was the modernistic view. Barth writes, The same judge who is satisfied with God today may no longer be so tomorrow. It is presumption to claim the right to say Yes or No to God merely because we are satisfied or dissatisfied, merely because an identified revelation conforms to an arbitrary concept derived from ordinary experience. In such circumstances it is inevitable that even the most conscientious theology will prescribe for God what his revelation must be and how it must be handled. This view denies freedom to God. God is forced to conform to nonrevealed concepts—otherwise he would not be doing his duty to man! Does this not entail a superiority of man over God? As Feuerbach so clearly showed, this sort of theology creates God in man's image and man is found to be worshipping himself.

THE PERSONAL GOD

Barth is obviously impressed with Feuerbach's arguments. The logic of Schleiermacher and Hegel, though in the form of absolute idealism, leads inexorably to atheistic realism. The tendency is seen in the translation of scriptural terms into an abstract philosophic jargon, as if the latter but not the former grasped the real truth about God. Barth attacks every view that makes God an abstract neuter: *ens perfectissimum*, *summum bonum*, *actus purus*, *primum movens*. In these terms used by Thomas Aquinas and Hegelians alike, personality is obscured, and the doctrine of the Trinity becomes an insuperable difficulty. From these neuters follows the post-Hegelian attack against the personality of God.

What is person is, argues Barth, was now thought to be known from the knowledge of the self as person. Person is the individual manifestation of the spirit, its individualization, which as such is limited, but contingently necessary. How then could God be a person? How could God be limited? Every determination is a negation, said Hegel. To call an object a stone, an animal, or a person, is to say that it is *not* something else. But the Absolute is All. It can have no determinations, limitations, or negations. Therefore "God" as unlimited cannot be a person. Said D. F. Strauss, "Absolute personality is a *non ens* which we cannot even conceive."

A further reason, perhaps a deeper reason, why these theologians could not attribute personality to God was that they ascribed it so vigorously to man. What does it matter that man is finite, if as a person he can conceive and describe the absolute spirit? Does not such a man fulfill the concept of personal being? Is he not the true knowing and willing I? To know is to control. The infinite, the God who is subject to man's control, obviously cannot be in any way unsettling, menacing, or critical, in spite of man's finitude. Man the person is supreme in thought and definition over this infinite. God has become the content of human reason. To predicate personality of this content, that is, of God, would mean an end to the predicating subject. This predication could only be the recognition of something that precedes all human predication. It would be the end of the control under which the neutral infinite so comfortably contemplates and governs itself as man's own infinite, realizing itself in the act of his finite personal being.

Naturally many attempts have been made to answer this Hegelian theology, but the weakness

in all the modern vindications of the personality of God is that they have accepted the same premise. Personality is ascribed to God because the concept of person expresses what is truest and best in human existence.

Feuerbach had exposed the modern "God" as the postulation or deification of humanity. He had done so with unmistakable clarity. One must wonder how the later theologians, by their references to the longing of the human heart, the infinite value of human personality, its meaning in history, and their open projection of human self-consciousness into the transcendent, could so naively be exposed to Feuerbach's arguments.

Thus Barth agrees with Feuerbach that liberal theology leads inevitably to atheistic realism; and Barth does not hesitate to call modernism "a damnable heresy." END

Gordon H. Clark is Professor of Philosophy in Butler University, Indianapolis. His latest work, *Karl Barth's Theological Method*, is scheduled for publication sometime this year.