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In War Time**

**Kant or Christ?
Tillich, Niebuhr, Barth**

**Christian Schools
And the Democratic Method**

**Israel and Paganism
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Kant or Christ?

Cornelius Van Til

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THE late Dr. Shailer Matthews was lecturing on Christian Ethics. An orthodox student asked the question whether, in discussing the Ethics of Jesus, it were necessary to inquire into His claim to divinity. Dr. Matthews replied in some such words as these: "If you have some dentistry or plumbing done you do not ask the dentist or the plumber to explain to you the technique of plumbing or of dentistry." "True," answered the orthodox student in turn, "but if I am the man with the toothache I want to know whether it is a plumber or a dentist that is working at my teeth."

Dr. Matthews' position may, I suppose, be said to be fairly typical of modern theology in general. Modern theology is, generally speaking, opposed to metaphysics. It has been informed by the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

The Pervasive Influence of Kant

Sir Arthur Eddington, in speaking of the philosophy of physical science tells us that "the physical universe is defined as the theme of a specified body of knowledge, just as Mr. Pickwick might be defined as the hero of a specified novel" (*The Philosophy of Physical Science*, p. 3). "A great advantage of this definition," says Eddington, "is that it does not prejudice the question whether the physical universe—or Mr. Pickwick—really exists" (p. 3). He illustrates his position by telling us of an ichthyologist. This ichthyologist explores the life of the ocean. "Surveying his catch, he proceeds in the usual manner of a scientist to systematize what it reveals. He arrives at two generalizations: (1) No sea-creature is less than two inches long. (2) All sea-creatures have gills" (p. 16). In explanation he adds: "Anything uncatchable by my net is *ipso facto* outside the scope of ichthyological knowledge, and is not part of the kingdom of fishes which has been defined as the theme of ichthyological knowledge. In short, what my net can't catch isn't fish" (p. 16). The ichthyologist is not interested in "an objective kingdom of fishes." Eddington's position is, we believe, fairly typical of modern science in general. Modern science too has been informed by the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

John Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty* contains a running argument against the notion of "antecedent being." "There are no conceivable ways in which the existence of ultimate unchangeable substances which interact without undergoing change in themselves can be reached by means of experimental

operations. Hence they have no empirical, no experimental standing; they are pure dialectic inventions" (p. 118). For Dewey scientific objects are "statistically standardized correlations of existential changes" (*The Philosophy of John Dewey*, in *The Library of Living Philosophers*, Volume I, p. 578). Dewey's position is, we believe, fairly typical of modern philosophy in general. Once more modern philosophy, like modern religion and modern science, has been informed by the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

God the Ultimate Interpreter

We are not surprised then that Professor Albert Einstein finds no difficulty in harmonizing science and religion: a positivist science and a positivist religion ought to be good friends. Nor is it any marvel that he should reject the notion of a personal God; only a religion without God fits in with a science that has no God. Indeed one of the great virtues of the frankly positivist positions of Matthews, Eddington, Dewey and Einstein is that it makes the issue between historic Christianity and modern thought so plain that he who runs may read it. "Tender-minded" Idealists and Realists of various schools befuddle this issue. They speak of some sort of antecedent being. They still speak of some sort of structure in the universe which the human mind finds as a datum. This might, on the surface, seem to make them sympathetic to a Christian point of view. It takes the "tough-minded" Selective Subjectivist to reject the "objective kingdom of fishes" altogether, the "tough-minded" Pragmatist to assure us that data are *taken* not given, and the "tough-minded" Relativist to inform us that a truly religious person occupies himself with thoughts, feelings, and aspirations to which he clings because of their super-personal value." Historic Christianity should expect no pity from the followers of Immanuel Kant.

With more or less consistency the followers of Kant ascribe, by implication if not otherwise, ultimate definitory power to the mind of man. Christianity, on the other hand, ascribes ultimate definitory power to the mind of God. What Eddington ascribes to man, the power of exhaustive dialectification of significant reality, Christianity ascribes to God. The God of Christianity has identified and does identify by exhaustive description. He has exhausted all classification so that for Him the *infima species* and the individual are identical. In modern science, in modern philosophy and in modern religion a would-be autonomous man wields the

'Logician's postulate' in sovereign fashion denying significant reality to that which has not been trimmed on his Procrustean bed. There is no man's land of neutrality between these two positions. Two "Creators" stand face to face in mortal combat. Two minds, each claiming to define fact before the other can meet fact stand squarely opposed to one another. If Christianity is true, the "facts" are what God says they must be; if the Kantian position is true, the "facts" are what man says they must be. The method employed by modern science, philosophy and religion does not seek to find God's structure in the facts of the universe. Man's structural activity is itself made the ultimate source of significant predication. The rejection of the God of Christianity is the prerequisite of the acceptance of current scientific, philosophical and religious methodology. There cannot be two ultimate interpreters. The orthodox position makes God, the modern position makes man the ultimate interpreter of reality.

Tillich and Niebuhr Both Kantian

The issue seems clearer than ever. Unfortunately there are those on the modern and there are those on the orthodox side who obscure the issue anew. By way of illustration I point to Tillich, Niebuhr and Barth on the modern and to Romanism on the orthodox side.

In his criticism of Einstein's recent article in *The Union Review* Professor Paul Tillich discusses four points. Says he: "Einstein attacks the idea of a personal God from four angles: The idea is not essential for religion. It is the creation of primitive superstition. It is self-contradictory. It contradicts the scientific world view" (*The Union Review*, November, 1940, p. 8). In his reply Tillich assumes with Kant that the phenomenal world is self-existent and self-operative. He believes in a personal God but in a personal God who is finite. He employs the Kantian form of argument against the idea of a God "interfering with natural events or being." In short the sort of God Tillich believes in ought to be quite unobjectionable to Einstein. It were better to draw the issue simply and plainly as Einstein does.

Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr's writings seem at first blush to clarify rather than obscure the issue. Niebuhr seeks to distinguish the Christian from the classical-modern view of man. He does not hesitate to say that the classical view "is determined by Greek metaphysical presuppositions" and that "the Christian view is determined by the ultimate presuppositions of Christian faith" (*The Nature and Destiny of Man: Vol. I. Human Nature*, p. 12). In a recent article in *The Union Review* he says: "the one element in modern culture which gives it unity and cohesion in all of its variety and contradictions is its rejection of the Christian doctrine of original sin." For all this we are grateful indeed. Yet at the critical moment Niebuhr himself accepts the classical-modern rather than the Christian view of man. Niebuhr's criticisms on naturalism and ideal-

ism are in themselves exceedingly fine. These criticisms might on the surface seem to commit him to the doctrine of a self-sufficient God and the Christian doctrine of sin. Yet such is, we are forced to hold, not the case. Niebuhr's position is similar to that of Kierkegaard! Kierkegaard, he argues, has taught us how to bridge the impassable gulf between "ideas" and "facts" presupposed by both naturalism and idealism. He has done so with his notion of the self, the Individual. This Individual, he argues, unifies within Himself true universality and true particularity, (*Human Nature*, p. 263). We reply that Kierkegaard's Individual is but the *homo noumenon* of Kant in modern dress. It is the personification of the ideal the autonomous man sets for himself.

Niebuhr Rejects Causal Creation

We are, accordingly, not surprised to find Niebuhr rejecting what he calls "literalistic errors" on the question of origins. "The relation of man's essential nature to his sinful state cannot be solved within terms of the chronological version of the perfection before the Fall. It is, as it were, a vertical rather than horizontal relation. When the Fall is made an event in history rather than a symbol of an aspect of every historical moment in the life of man, the relation of evil to goodness in that moment is obscured" (*Idem*, p. 269). But if the "literalistic errors" are to be rejected the naturalistic and idealistic errors, against which Niebuhr has so vigorously protested, must be accepted.

The error of the naturalist, argues Niebuhr, is to regard causality as the principle of meaning (p. 134). But without causal creation by a God of self-contained meaning the world of causality is what the naturalist says it is, a world without meaning. The "vitalities of history" (p. 142) then have in them the power to defy forever the "structure" that "God" may seek to impose upon them. It is true enough that naturalistic interpretations "do not understand the total stature of freedom in which human life stands" and that they are unable "to appreciate the necessity of a trans-historical norm for historical life" (p. 164). It is equally true, however, that Niebuhr, in rejecting causal creation, retains a naturalistically interpreted world which must artificially be brought into relationship with the world of the "trans-historical."

The error of the idealist, argues Niebuhr, is that he has a God of pure form, of abstract structure. But a God who is not the causal Creator of the world can be nothing more than pure Form. We may impersonate this Form but all the bellows of our imagination cannot give it life. "Formless stuff" and "abstract law" is the only alternative to causal creation.

Also Barth Denies God's Self-Sufficiency

What then does Niebuhr offer us that is better than the "idolatry" of naturalism and the "idolatry"

of idealism? He offers us a combination of these idolatries. For all his criticism on naturalistic and idealistic "idolatries" he yet turns these "idolatries" into subordinate principles which, for him, are true in their place. "Naturalism" and "idealism" are after all thought to be right as far as they go. The "ultra-rational foundations and presuppositions" of the Christian faith will, according to Niebuhr, have to accord with the presuppositions of naturalism and idealism.

Niebuhr keeps the "ultra-rational" principles within proper bounds, within bounds that the "autonomous individual" can readily allow. The contrast between the classical-modern and the biblical view of man has after all been effaced. The superrationalistic dimensionalism that comes forth from the crucible of this procedure may be said to be "nearer to the Christian faith and a more perverse corruption of it" than either naturalism or idealism.

A theology that is based on the *Critique of Pure Reason* can do no justice either to the idea of God or to the idea of man. It would be simpler and more true to fact if Tillich and Niebuhr would follow the example of Eddington, Dewey, and Einstein. The same thing holds true with respect to Karl Barth. Barth's challenge to "modern Protestantism" is to be taken *cum grano*. Modern Protestantism is *modern*; it is Kantian. So is Barth. The underlying epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions of Barth and of "modern Protestantism" alike are found in the critical philosophy of Kant. The quarrels between them are but family quarrels soon to be mended when anyone comes with the challenge of a self-sufficient God. Barth's ire does not rise to the fulness of its power till he is face to face with the doctrine of the sovereign God. With the help of Kant he brings down this God to the position of correlativity with a self-existent temporal flux. We conclude that such men as Tillich, Niebuhr and Barth obscure the issues that face modern man.

The Fundamental Issue

From the orthodox side the issue is also obscured. It is obscured in particular by the adherents of Scholastic theology. To go back from Kant to St.

Thomas and back from St. Thomas to Aristotle offers no help. Professor Etienne Gilson, for all his brilliant effort, can find no harmony between a philosophy based on autonomous reason and a theology based on revelation.

Protestant Apologists have been all too ready to follow the Scholastic line. Bishop Butler's *Analogy* and the many books based on it still cater to autonomous reason. But for all this obscuration both on the part of the modern and the orthodox theologians the issue is at bottom simple and clear. A consistent Christianity, such as we must humbly hold the Reformed Faith to be, must set an interpretation of its own over against modern science, modern philosophy and modern religion. Its thinking is controlled, at every point, by the presupposition of the existence of the self-sufficient God of which the Bible speaks. It is upon the basis of this presupposition alone, the Reformed Faith holds, that predication of any sort at any point has relevance and meaning. If we may not presuppose such an "antecedent" Being man finds his speck of rationality to be swimming as a mud-ball in a bottomless and shoreless ocean.

Reason, which on Kantian basis has presumed to legislate for the whole of reality, needs chance for its existence. If reality were God-structured the human mind could not be ultimately legislative. The idea of brute irrationality is presupposed in modern methodology. At the same time it is this brute irrationality which undermines every interpretative endeavor on the part of would-be autonomous man. There is on the modern basis no possibility of the identification of any fact let alone the possibility of finding an intelligent relationship of one fact to another fact. The possibility of science and philosophy as well as the possibility of theology presupposes the idea of a God, whose counsel determines "whatsoever comes to pass." Only then has the spectre of brute fact and ultimate irrationality been slain. If we are to follow the method of modern science, modern philosophy and modern theology Merlin will never walk the earth again. Modern thought is, like the Prodigal Son at the swine-trough but, unlike the Prodigal, it will not return to the Father's house.

BUY BONDS!