

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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The Supernaturalism of Christianity

THE supernatural," in the words of the late Dr. B. B. WARFIELD, "is the very breath of Christianity's nostrils and an anti-supernaturalistic atmosphere is to it the deadliest miasma."

The fact just alluded to—for fact it certainly is—goes a long way, almost the whole way, in accounting for whatever depression of fortunes Christianity is suffering today. Previous to the rise of Modernism in the eighteenth century there had been numerous individuals who had maintained that all that comes to pass, including religion and morals, could be accounted for without positing any supernatural factor; but the thinking of humanity as a whole had been supernaturalistic to the core. As that erudite Dutch scholar, HERMAN BAVINCK, has observed: "Before the eighteenth century the existence of a supernatural world, and the necessity, possibility, and reality of a special revelation, had never been seriously called in question." The last two hundred years, however, has witnessed the rise and spread of the so-called empirico-scientific life and world view which turns its back on all supernaturalism and professes to give a purely naturalistic explanation and interpretation of all that has been and is. Within the last seventy-five years the acceptance of this anti-supernaturalistic view of things has become so wide-spread, especially in academic circles, that its advocates not unnaturally look upon it as an "assured result" of modern discovery and confidently anticipate the time when culture and civilization will be built on a purely naturalistic basis.

The effect of the rise and spread of this anti-supernaturalistic conception of things on the fortunes of Christianity would not have been so serious were it not for the fact that it found wide-spread acceptance within the Christian Church itself under the name of Modernism. For what Modernism is, in effect, in its consistent forms of expression, is a de-supernaturalized version of Christianity. How far matters have gone in this respect is indicated by the fact that HENRY NELSON WIEMAN of the University of Chicago in a widely advertised book, entitled "Ventures in Belief: Christian Convictions for a Day of Uncertainty," issued under the auspices of the Student Christian Association Movement of America, and which includes among its contributors such well-known "leaders" in Christian thinking as FRANCIS J. McCONNELL, HENRY SLOANE COFFIN, KIRBY PAGE and HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK, says that the sense of

futility that characterizes modern life is due to the fact that men have lost faith in the supernatural without the courage to commit themselves whole-heartedly to the natural. He writes as follows:

"This sense of futility, this refusal to believe in any cosmic destiny for man, is chiefly due to the fact that men have found it impossible to believe in the supernatural. Heretofore for several centuries men have envisaged their highest values and vocation in terms of the supernatural. But there is no supernatural and men are fast coming to see that there is not. But they are not willing to commit themselves to the naturalistic process. They stand looking wistfully off into the sky whence has vanished the delusion of the supernatural and think there is no longer anything to make human life magnificent" (p. 101-102).

Just why men holding such views should suppose that they are giving expression to "Christian convictions" we are at a loss to understand, seeing that nothing is more certain than that Christianity de-supernaturalized is Christianity extinct. We wish it could be said that such a view-point is held by only a few. Such, however, is not the case. It is, or at least threatens to become, the dominant view-point of the age in which we live: for what is or at least rapidly becoming, the outstanding characteristic of the age in which we live? Is it not its deeply rooted and wide spread naturalism of thought and sentiment? Even where the reality of the supernatural is not openly

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published under the auspices of a Commission of the Presbyterian Church. When its editor tells us that the material of which the book was composed was selected with the thought of presenting the problem of the sexes from "the angle not only of the conservative but also of the liberal, and even radical" we are not to suppose that he is referring to the differences that exist among those calling themselves Christians so much as to the differences that exist among men in general. As used by him, roughly speaking, "conservative" seemingly refers to those who believe in monogamy, "liberal" to those who believe in monogamy with reservations and "radical" to those who believe in companionate marriage and easy divorce. At any rate the viewpoint that receives least consideration in the book is what would ordinarily be called the conservative Christian. Much space is devoted to the views of men like Bertrand Russell, Walter Lippmann, Benjamin B. Lindsey and other enemies of Christianity but no definite space is allotted to those holding either the Roman Catholic or the orthodox Protestant view. It seems to us that better things might have been expected of a book put forth under such Presbyterian auspices. Much as we dissent from the view expressed in the recent Papal Encyclical we think it infinitely preferable to many of the views that find expression in this book and are at a loss to know on what principle it was excluded and the views of atheists and other open enemies of Christianity included. More especially we are at a loss to understand why the book includes no statement of the orthodox Protestant view. Possibly its editor would hold that the orthodox Protestant view is set forth in substance in that portion of the Commission's report to the last Assembly that is included in the book, together with the extracts from the reports of somewhat similar Commissions appointed by the Federal Council of Churches and the Protestant Episcopal Church; but, if we mistake not, even these contain little that could not have been written by a non-Christian and almost nothing that could not have been written by a "liberal" or "modernist" Christian.

Opinion may differ as to the propriety of a Commission of the Presbyterian Church inviting persons like Bertrand Russell, Benjamin B. Lindsey, A. A. Brill, Walter Lippmann and Ellen Key, not to mention Maude Royden, Sherwood Eddy and Joseph Fort Newton and others to contribute to a symposium intended for the instruction and guidance of Christian leaders in their efforts to learn what really constitutes marriage and the conditions and limitations that should be imposed on the privilege of divorce; but it seems to us that there is little room for difference of opinion when it is maintained that a symposium issued under its auspices should give some prominence to that view of marriage and divorce

expressed or implied in the teachings of Christ and His apostles. The failure to include in this symposium anything like an exposition and defense of the Biblical conception of marriage and divorce is particularly surprising in view of the fact that all the members of the Commission are either ministers or elders of the Presbyterian Church and so on record as holding that the Bible is the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. We are somewhat afraid that the Commission is more concerned to present a conception of marriage "based upon demonstrable scientific data" than one based on the Word of God. They seemingly forget that as yet scientific theories come and go but that the Word of God abideth forever.

This volume may be commended to those wanting to learn somewhat about the break-up of family life in America; also to those interested in knowing the non-Christian and partly Christian conceptions of marriage that are being advocated and practiced today; but it has small value for those primarily interested in marriage as a divine institution as it was ordained by God and blessed by Jesus Christ.

S. G. C.

THE KARL BARTH THEOLOGY OR THE NEW TRANSCENDENTALISM. By Alvin Sylvester Zerbe, Ph.D., D.D., Professor Emeritus, Central Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio. Central Publishing House, Cleveland, Ohio. Price, \$2.25.

READERS of CHRISTIANITY TODAY, particularly in North America, will be interested in this volume since it is perhaps the only work in English dealing exhaustively with the much discussed theology of Karl Barth. As such it is to be commended as a clear and readable aid to the understanding of a significant modern movement.

Karl Barth's theology is based upon an antitheistic theory of reality. Barth has made God and man to be correlatives of one another. Barth has no genuine transcendence theory. At first blush it would seem as though the opposite were the case. His whole theology is heralded as a reaction against the modern emphasis upon God's immanence in the universe. And his reaction is extreme. He even denies the real significance of the temporal world. The whole of history is to be condemned as worthless. The eternal is said to be everything and the temporal is said to be nothing. Does not this seem as though Barth holds to a genuine transcendence of God? Does it not seem as though transcendence means everything for Barth? It does seem so—but it is not truly so. Barth holds that "the only real history takes place in eternity." If then man and the temporal universe in general are to have any significance at all they must be an aspect of God and as such be really as eternal as God. Anything to be

real, says Barth, must transcend time. Man is real only in so far as he transcends time. We are true personalities only in so far as we are experiences of God. We are not to say with Descartes, I think therefore I am, or even with Hocking, I think God therefore I am, but we are to say, I am thought by God therefore I am. (Dogmatik, pp. 50-60). Abraham's faith takes place in eternity. Resurrection means eternity. The entire epistle of Paul to the Romans is said to bring this one message that we must be eternalized. To be saved means to be conscious of one's eternity.

Barth has made God to be highly exalted above time. For this we would be sincerely grateful. Only thus is God seen to be qualitatively distinct from man. Only thus can we stand strong against Modernism. But Barth has also made man to be highly exalted above time. For this we are sincerely sorry. By doing this Barth has completely neutralized the exaltation of God. By doing this God is no longer qualitatively distinct from man. Modern theology holds that both God and man are temporal. Barth holds that both God and man are eternal. The results are identical. Whether I travel in style with the Graf Zeppelin or plod along laboriously with my old "Model T" is only a difference of pleasure while on the trip. We have stared at the Graf Zeppelin till we thought that it really was above space and time. Whether God and man are regarded as correlatives in the thick, heavy atmosphere of time or in the rarified realms of eternity makes no difference. In both cases man is as necessary to God as God is to man. In both cases the Universe is greater than man not only but also greater than God. In both cases God is reduced to a universal principle that is manifest in equally original particulars. In both cases the transcendence of God, without which there is no God, has disappeared. Karl Barth's theory of reality is as antitheistic as that of Pragmatism.

In the second place Karl Barth's theology is based upon an antitheistic theory of knowledge. He has basically denied the complete self-consciousness of God as absolute personality. He has no room for revelation. At first blush it would seem as though the very opposite were the case. He says that only in the eternal is true knowledge. He says that all knowledge comes by revelation. But again Barth has overworked his principle. Pragmatism says that all knowledge, for God as well as for man, is based upon synthesis, upon investigation of the facts as they are somehow spurted forth from chaos unto the void. For neither God nor man can the ideal of knowledge be that of complete comprehension because there is no telling how many more facts will appear. On the other hand Karl Barth says that all knowledge for man as well as for God is based upon analysis of the eternal truths that exist apart from time. The ideal of knowledge for man as well as for God is complete

comprehension. Knowledge is no knowledge unless it is completely comprehensive. Thus Barth seems to be very theistic in comparison with Pragmatism because he flatly denies that the temporal world produces anything new. But the illusion that Barth is a theist in his theory of knowledge quickly disappears when it is observed that man is once more put on the level with God by being placed with God above the temporal order. God and man are engaged in a common analysis of principles that exist independently of both. Knowledge is made a cooperative enterprise between God and man so that man may "reveal" his findings to God as well as God "reveal" his findings to man. And thus there is no real knowledge of comprehension even for God since the Universe is higher than He, and analysis is reduced to synthesis for both God and man. There is only one step between Karl Barth and Pragmatism; theism is equally opposed to both.

It is upon the basis of these antitheistic theories of reality and of knowledge that Barth's system of doctrine is built. His system of doctrine does not present to us an essentially Reformed or Christian viewpoint with divergencies here and there. His system of doctrine springs from an anti-theistic root and presents some external similarities to the Reformed point of view but never on any point agrees with Reformed theology. This can readily be seen in his conception of creation. Barth denies that creation as it came forth from the hand of God was good, and was to have a genuine significance. Instead, Barth's doctrine resembles that of paganism which held that the spatial-temporal world was somehow existing independently of God and was evil in itself. Accordingly Barth has a very low conception of sin. Man is not really responsible for sin and is not really guilty inasmuch as sin or evil was already in the world. Hence Barth has a very low view of redemption. The whole of objective redemption is reduced to the prosaic level of setting the ideal of the eternal before man. The incarnation is not historical nor is the cross. In so far as they are absolute and have significance Barth says they are above history. Historic Christianity is destroyed and a philosophy of ideals put in its place. Subjective redemption too, is no longer the victory of God's grace over sin in man but is reduced to the pagan principle of elevation in the scale of being. Christian ethics is no more. Heaven offers release from time, not release from sin. Paul's teaching that death has entered into the world because of sin must be replaced by the doctrine that death is natural because a constitutive element of the Universe. There is thus no real difference between Christianity and other religions because all of them are historical and the historical is as the night in which all cows are black. All "Bibles" are in this respect alike. No preacher needs be bound by the authority of any sacred book because the

Word may come through him apart from it. Thus the acceptance of the "results" of higher criticism are not merely an inconsistent concession to the spirit of the times on the part of an otherwise Reformed theologian. On the contrary rationalism in this sense is founded upon the more basic rationalism of all non-theistic thought which makes man autonomous and sets him up as the source and standard of truth. Barth knows no absolute God. His theology is a "sport" and will soon revert to type. Professor McGiffert of Chicago predicted last summer that Barthianism would not last because it was really a recrudescence of Calvinism. If we might venture a prediction it would be that Barthianism may last a long time because it is really Modernism, but that neither Barthianism nor Modernism will last in the end because they are not Calvinism, that is, consistent Christianity.

It seems that the author of the book under review agrees in the main with the position all too briefly outlined above. The author has studied widely and carefully in the literature of Barthian theology. What is more, the author came to the study of Barthianism with a true historic sense and a knowledge of his Reformation theology. Accordingly he will have nothing of the hasty identification of Calvinism and Barthianism. The author shows by many telling criticisms that the

two spring from different roots. For Barth he says: "Creatureness, sin and death go together. Scripture, however, says that God saw everything that he had made, and behold it 'was very good'" (p. 70). More important still our author says of Barth: "He is weakest at the point where weakness means failure, his doctrine of God" (p. 253). And as to the hope of some that Barthianism is an effective cure for Modernism our author sees right well that it is based upon an illusion. Says he, "Unless it be remedied, we fear that Barthianism is a poorly disguised agnosticism and unfitted to confront this God-defying age" (p. 261). Barth is a captive to his death-enemy, Modernism. "We are almost at the point at which, if charity did not forbid, we could charge Brother Brunner with himself starting with and accepting a 'religion of immanence', for like the rest of mankind he must start with an Ego" (p. 215). We believe therefore that the author's book will be conducive to the highly desirable end that every branch of the Reformed churches will resolutely disown Barthianism as an offshoot of Reformed theology. We are very thankful for its reaction against the prevalent emphasis upon God's immanence but this does not lead us to accept its transcendence doctrine as Christian or theistic.

CORNELIUS VAN TIL.

Questions Relative to Christian Faith and Practice

Christ and the Old Testament

Editor of CHRISTIANITY TODAY:

In your December issue you maintain that Jesus "taught that the Scriptures of the Old Testament are completely trustworthy." I am interested to know how you reconcile such a representation with Jesus' own words in the Sermon on the Mount. See Matthew 5:21-48. It would seem that Jesus himself did not regard the Old Testament as "completely trustworthy."

Sincerely,

C. M. B.

IT is frequently asserted that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus criticised the Old Testament and condemned it as faulty. This objection drawn from Matt. 5:21-48, however, is easily refuted. Throughout this passage the contrast is not so much between Jesus' own teaching and the teaching of the Old Testament as between Jesus' interpretation of the Old Testament and that of the ancients. Ordinarily when Jesus quoted the Old Testament He employed the formula, "It is written" but here He uses the formula, "Ye have heard that it was said." Moreover an examination of what He quotes

evidences that He had in mind traditional interpretations rather than the actual teaching of the Old Testament. It is the more surprising that this passage should be cited as implying that Jesus rejected moral teachings of the Old Testament when in the paragraph immediately preceding, speaking specifically of the moral teaching of the Old Testament, He had said: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of the least of these commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." It would seem almost as though Jesus foreseeing that what He was about to say might be understood as criticism of the Old Testament itself expressly warned against such a misuse of His words. The very most that can fairly be said is that Jesus, like all who hold to the complete trustworthiness of the Bible, regarded the Old Testament as incomplete; but that as the Son of God He took upon Himself to legislate more adequately for the children of the kingdom. His "But I say unto you" is an expression of the Messianic consciousness of our Lord, not of a consciousness common to Christians. That Jesus should have