

THE CRISIS IN CRISIS THEOLOGY

WHEN these two essays¹ were written—in 1934—a climax was reached in what some have called the Theology of Crisis. For some time before that date it had been obvious that Brunner and Barth, the leading exponents of the school, had been drifting apart in their respective formulations of the doctrine of man, but the clear lines of their divergence were not defined till the publication of these essays. Both writers appear to have modified details of their teaching since 1934, but the radical disagreement remains. The essays, therefore, may be regarded as giving classic expression to two fundamentally opposed interpretations of the interaction of nature and Grace from a Protestant standpoint.

The disagreement is partly explained, but only partly, by temperament. Barth is a preacher, a prophet who thunders from the heights, often through obscuring clouds; he is a man of passion, impatient in his convictions. Brunner on his part is a teacher, much concerned with clarity in exposition, far more sensitive to difficulties, broader in his sympathies; but at times he lacks the intuitive genius of his opponent. While all this is important and a key to much they write and to some of their oppositions (for the one, by his very psychological constitution, is often the complement of the other), yet it is not the whole story. The problem raised in the essays is not susceptible of any such facile solution. There is a real divergence, a parting of the way which is fundamental for their theology.

What, then, is the point at issue? Let us turn to the essays for enlightenment.

Brunner draws six theses from the works of Barth, theses which he holds are marked by a one-sided exaggeration. Barth, he thinks, has pressed the principle *sola gratia* to such a degree that the original image of our creation is destroyed, and hence also the possibility of doing good or evil. If of the image no remnant remains the second thesis follows, that Scripture is the sole norm of knowledge of God and that hence there is no such thing as a general revelation of God in nature. Thirdly, if Christ is the sole saving grace of God, there is no grace of creation and preservation active from the creation of the world; nor, fourthly, any such thing as ordinances of creation. It follows, fifthly, that there can be no 'point of contact' for the saving

¹ *Natural Theology*; comprising 'Nature and Grace' by Professor Brunner, and the reply 'No' by Dr Karl Barth. Translated by Peter Fraenkel, with an Introduction by Professor John Baillie (Bles, 6s.). The essays were *Natur und Gnade* and *Nein*.

grace of God and, sixthly, that the new creation in Christ, is new in the strictest sense and in no way perfects the old.

These statements ascribed by Brunner to Barth are clearly seen to be concerned with the problem of *Theologia naturalis*, and, what is in essence the same question, the *imago Dei in homine*. Brunner's attack on the theses falls into two parts—theological and historical. His theological reply is based on his contention, that in spite of the Fall, the *humanum* still distinguishes man from the rest of creation. Sinful he is, yet he is also responsible and a subject. Hence Brunner feels himself compelled to draw a distinction between the formal and the material image. By the formal image he means man as human and responsible, while the words material image are used to describe that content, that gift which has been lost. The relevance of this with regard to the other theses is at once obvious. The formal image, the *humanum*, is the 'point of contact', the 'purely formal possibility of being addressed'. This remains to man even in his fallen state, but no material point of contact is left, for the Word itself creates man's ability to believe. The possibility, the capacity, is formal and formal only. It is clear, Brunner continues, from the words of Scripture, that God can be recognised in his works, that God remains perceptible in his creation. Yet it is equally clear that sin makes us blind to this objective perceptibility, so that we can only have knowledge that is not knowledge, knowledge of law and responsibility, not saving knowledge. Thus for Brunner natural knowledge though objective is insufficient, while from the side of the subject sin dulls man's sight so that he misrepresents the revelation of God in creation. In faith, however, the revelation in creation is recognised in all its glory through the light that is Christ. From this general position Brunner's attitude towards the remaining theses can easily be predicted.

The historical part of the essay is concerned with Calvin's teaching, and there is little doubt that Brunner makes his case that Calvin in many places taught that a remnant of the image survives sin, sufficient 'to enable man to know God, but not to know his How, to urge towards religion, without making true religion possible'. Brunner proceeds to infer that this remnant approximates to his formal capacity or formal image, and that it is Barth, and not Brunner, who is guilty of departing from the teaching of the Reformation. The Reformed position implies, he thinks, that the *imago* is the principle of natural theology in the subjective sense, though it is so disfigured by untruth that the true *theologia naturalis*, i.e. true knowledge of God in his works, can only come through Christ. To clarify this statement it should be noted that Brunner uses the word natural in two senses: (1) the objective divine; such permanent capacity for

revelation as God has bestowed upon his works; and (2) the subjective sinful; the use man makes of the former in his ignorant knowledge.

In the final portion of the essay Brunner defends himself against the charge of approaching the Catholic position. He asserts that this is to be repudiated since in 'Roman Catholicism the objective and subjective concepts of nature coalesce' and that for Catholics 'sin has, as it were, nothing to do with this question'. He tells us that the Church holds that 'there is a system of natural theology, a self-sufficient rational system, detachable from *theologia revelata*, and capable of serving it for a solid foundation'. To crown all we are instructed that the image is 'undamaged' and 'reason competent and adequate to deal with nature'. We cannot here write a complete theology of Man, we can only ask where Dr Brunner got these notions. One hesitates to accuse a thinker of his stature of complete ignorance of the works of St Thomas and the Decrees of the Vatican Council, but it seems to be the most charitable view to take. Here at least Dr Brunner is talking nonsense; and it stands to Barth for justice that he has noted the absurdity.

Barth, Brunner considers, falls into the error which he imagines to be opposite to the Catholic one. His denial of any likeness, any greater or less suitability that man may have to be the subject of revelation, of any *analogia entis*, is to commit theological suicide, and to fall into the vacuity of Nominalism.

Barth's counterblast opens, and indeed continues, at gale force. Revelation is grace and grace revelation. True he has been guilty of atavisms, but *gratia sola* stands in all its purity. In expounding his theme he tells us that by natural theology he means 'every (positive or negative) formulation of a system which claims to be theological i.e. to interpret divine revelation, whose subject, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose method differs equally from the exposition of Scripture'. Natural theology then 'does not exist as an entity capable of becoming a separate object within what I consider to be real theology'. It is a temptation to error, something which should be regarded with complete lack of interest. How can capacity for revelation be squared with sovereign electing grace?

Barth admits the existence of the *humanum* and so on; but why, he asks, does all that make man more 'suited'? Rather man of himself can do nothing for his salvation. The possibility of doing, which is grace, includes the possibility of receiving; again *gratia sola*.

Where, he demands of Brunner, does *de facto* knowledge, though misrepresented knowledge, come in? If it means anything at all, it

implies at least negative preparation, a capacity which is not just merely formal, but something very material. Everybody knows that man is man, but what has that to do with a 'point of contact'? If such existed, man would not be impotent in respect of grace.

Man is a sinner through and through; he has, therefore, no capacity for God. It is God who creates the very conditions of knowledge of himself, else we must say that man of himself to some extent knows and does the will of God. In virtue of *gratia sola* Brunner's formal image must be rejected, and with it his natural theology. In Christ man is made a new creature, and there is no other knowledge before and beside that given in him.

Brunner's careful exposition of Calvin is met by the statement that the broad lines of the Reformer's doctrine of grace must be made more pointed in its specific applications. He admits that in Calvin there is no 'emphatic rejection of the temptation to look for a possible core of truth in pre-Christian knowledge of God'; and that he did allow for a *duplex cognitio*. Nevertheless, he argues, there are passages such as, 'Christ is the *imago* in which God indeed manifests not only his heart but also his hands and his feet', which are more consistent with his general position.

The element in his thought to which Brunner draws attention is to be explained by the fact that Calvin took over certain medieval doctrines without seeing all that they implied.

Barth concludes by proclaiming that freedom to know God is a miracle, even the ability to despair, to say 'Woe is me' is not possible to us outside of God's saving action. True knowledge of self cannot precede the knowledge of God. *Gratia sola*, all else is sin and idolatry. There is no point of contact, no capacity for God, since the Holy Ghost creates his point of contact.

So concludes the debate. Without injustice we may say that neither is fair to the other. Barth talks as if Brunner meant a capacity merely supported by grace, and Brunner overstates Barth's oneness. Yet, in the last resort, each is right about the other. Barth has seen that Brunner's position is not in full conformity with the stark principles of the Reformation. The purely formal image either means something or it does not. If it does it is difficult for Brunner, without indulging in the use of almost meaningless dialectic, to hold to the radical discontinuity postulated by the Theology of Crisis. If he has in fact abandoned this postulate, then his teaching requires not only compromise regarding conclusions, but reconstruction in principle. If the postulates be granted then there is little doubt that Barth's presentation is the more consistent. On

the other hand Brunner has seen that certain problems are raised by this very self-consistency when it is seen in a wider context. How is it possible to assert with any meaning that 'I believe'? On Barth's premisses it seems rather that it is the Holy Spirit who believes. It is difficult to visualise how it can even be said that revelation is received. No doubt Barth would reply that it is the impossible miracle of God's love. But surely in the light of the Gospels, of the *sarkosis* of the Word, we must ask whether Barth's statement is really relevant to the point in question. It draws attention to the mystery of God's love, but does it adequately express that love as revealed in history?

Barth's whole position presupposes that everything is either God or not God, in the sense that there is an absolute discontinuity between God and man. It is true that in one sense the statement is meaningful, but it is interesting to observe that in some of his later writings Barth seems to recede from the view. We are told that the Holy Spirit speaks not only to us but in us (*Dogmatics I*, 578) and that faith is certainly also a human experience (*op. cit.* 250). These passages suggest that Barth is in some sense aware of events which appear to fall outside the scope of his principles.

If Barth is to avoid a position which withdraws fallen men into the world of atheism, a world apart from God; if he is not to produce the impression, whatever he may say to tone down his conclusions, that the flesh of Christ is not a true medium of revelation, then he must modify his original formulation of the 'infinite gulf'. His emphasis on the saving grace of God, on the divine transcendence is noble, and true, but it is not all the truth. Even the notion of transcendence can be pressed too hard, can lead to an exclusive concentration by reason of which man dictates to God. There is nothing in revelation to suggest that man, sinner though he be, ever escapes from the judgment and the mercy of God. The mystery of God's dealings with men is not susceptible of solution by rigid categories which attempt to define how alone the Almighty can act. Fundamentally the question reduces to one concerning the nature of the Incarnation, as to whether the God revealed in Jesus Christ is divided from man in the way Barth would suggest. So strongly does Barth press his view that it would seem that the flesh, the manhood of Christ is cut off from the divinity. It is a sign, a token of something Other, he tells us, a phrase which might be quite orthodox, but which may equally well be destructive of the unity of the person of our Lord.

Barth's opinions seem to involve, though we are sure he would reject the thought, that the world is so fallen, that it has escaped out of the hands of God, for no point of contact remains. Is God then

not Creator, once and for all? Here again Barth seems to hold positions which are inconsistent with his basic presuppositions. Man is still God's since he is under judgment and in Christ the world is judged. The Incarnation is an event in history, the Spirit 'gets through', but this is surely only conceivable if God is admitted to be ontologically present to his creation, rather than asserted to be absent from it. He is 'other' than creation, but his infinitude which super-exceeds the categories of transcendence and immanence is not violated if he is held to be present as Preserver. His calling of man in grace is sovereign, but is not contradictory of his sovereign action as creator. It is by his disposition and judgment that there is a continuity. Man, created for him, can never in reality flout the divine decree. It is only because man's goal and end is in God that he falls under judgment, the inescapable expression of God the creator. Brunner has seen this, and aware that Barth's 'transcendence' is irreconcilable with Scripture, tries to modify his conclusions, but since he cannot bring himself to reinterpret *gratia sola*, falls an easy prey to Barth's onslaught.

Barth speaks as a great preacher, who has seen a vision of the majesty of God, who utters a warning to a secular and sinful world. But he has failed to discriminate between metaphysical and moral judgments, so that denials and condemnations which may be valid when a preacher is denouncing sin and unbelief, are transferred into the ontological order and regarded as an adequate statement of the relation, or lack of one, between the creature and the Creator.

It would be of interest, it is perhaps relevant to remark, to study some of the philosophic influences which have led Barth to formulate his very distinctive theory of knowledge. Like Tertullian, whom he so resembles in his more waspish moods, Athens has had far more to do with the formulation of his position than he would readily admit. But before all else, we reply to Barth, 'Search the Scriptures'.

IAN HISLOP, O.P.