

# Modern Theology: An Exchange <sup>483</sup>

by Hugo Meynell and Robert Jenson

Dr Jenson rightly noted at the beginning of his review that the book was not a survey of contemporary theology in general. But I do not think he should have gone on assuming, against all the evidence provided by the book itself, that it was intended to be such. Perhaps the original title I suggested to the publisher, *Problems in Modern Theology*, would have been less misleading to him. He observed that I had hardly said anything about contemporary Roman Catholic theologians, and that I had left out a great many important Protestants; he might further have observed that a large part of the book (Chapters 2, 3 and 9), deal very little with 'theologians' in the usual sense of the world.

He might also have adverted to my own clear statement on page 9 as to what the book *was* about. I recognized that the chapters did not represent a single sustained argument; but I claimed that they were united by a single purpose: 'to point out a number of fundamental and mutually related mistakes—philosophical, historical and practical—by which it seems to me that *much* contemporary theology is vitiated' (italics restricted to the present context). Two claims are involved in this: (a) that there is a cluster of related propositions and arguments propounded by *some* influential modern theologians; (b) that these are erroneous. The first claim laid on me the task of accurate exposition of *some* of the work of *some* of the theologians influential at the present time. It was thus pointless to refer to Pannenburg or Moltmann, who do not make the mistakes I was trying to point out; or to cite Fuchs or Ebeling—who appear to me to adopt a compromise position, ultimately untenable, between the position I want to stigmatize and the traditional one—when there are less equivocal examples to hand.

The two positions which I have tried to distinguish may be identified by their answer to the following crucial question: What propositions about the past, apart from those which almost everyone would accept (particularly about the historical Jesus), and what propositions about the future (particularly, about life after death to be enjoyed by all or some men), would, if they were false, make Christian faith vain? In other words, what historical or eschatological propositions are entailed by Christian belief? Now the conception of faith which appears to dominate the work of *some* contemporary theologians (I never implied all, or even most, or even most Protestants) is such that no conceivable state of affairs, outside the present

attitudes and dispositions of the believer, would be such as to falsify it. I tried to show, from the work of a number of contemporary philosophers, that this conception of a faith, far from *resolving* real philosophical difficulties, actually *increases* them (Chapters 2 and 3); that its much-advertised benefits for the understanding of Christian morality, for Scriptural exegesis, for expounding the meaning of the concept 'God', and for the stance of the Church in an industrial society, were largely if not wholly illusory—while quite different approaches to all these problems would prove a good deal more fruitful (Chapters 4, 9, 2-3, 5 and 8). I contrasted this conception of faith with one which I called 'traditional'—not because no representative contemporary theologian can be found who *does* hold it (I mentioned several, Protestant as well as Catholic, in the course of the book), but because no theologian of past times can be found who *doesn't*; this traditional conception of faith is such that it does entail propositions about the past and the future. Now a reader of such philosophers of religion as R. B. Braithwaite and R. M. Hare, whose views on Christianity are set out with admirable brevity and lucidity, knows immediately that here is being presented something radically different from what traditional Christians have understood by their beliefs. It is assumed quite openly that all is up with Christianity in its traditional form; here is something which is being recommended to us as worth salvaging from the wreck. When one comes new to Bultmann or Gregor-Smith one cannot at first believe that the same thing—the reduction of Christianity to a mere subjective aesthetic or moral attitude—is being done. One has to read many books, and check many references, before being absolutely sure. It is the merit of Paul van Buren to have shown the ultimate identity of the Bultmann and the Braithwaite line. If God had not invented Paul van Buren, it would have been necessary for someone else to do so.

It remains for me, having tried to sum up what my book *was* intended to be about, to take up individual points made by Dr Jenson. He claims that I have failed to take into account a central feature of the work of Bultmann and his school: the attempt to show the relevance of history to faith, and the relation of faith to past and future. I counter that if one's conception of faith is such as I have ascribed to Bultmann, the attempt is doomed from the start; whereas if one's conception is 'traditional', there is no real difficulty; faith has certain historical truth-conditions, hence is conceivably vulnerable to the work of the historian (contrast Bultmann, *passim*), and there's an end of the matter. Dr Jenson talks in this context of 'life lived by and for the insecurity of the future, a life to which we can be challenged only by a word from the past'; I think this formula hits off very well the conception held by the Bultmannians of the existence characteristic of faith, and I described their position in rather similar terms on page 163. But the formula subtly falsifies, although it appears superficially to do justice to, the dependence of the 'tradi-

tional' kind of faith on events of the past and the future. Any man of culture in a civilized society, and any man whatever in a savage one, is enabled to some degree to cope with the acute anxieties and insecurities of human existence by great myths, fairy-tales or novels 'from the past'. But faith, at least as traditionally understood, is more than acknowledgement of the compelling power of a great story. To 'create an ontology in which God and we are understood in terms of the prior reality of the word' sounds to me an enterprise which is theologically fatal to just the degree to which it is intelligible; I infer that Odin really existed in just the same way as the Christian God does now, in virtue of the fact that the Norsemen expressed their understanding of the human condition in terms of stories about him. (In this case, the Norse sagas would have what Dr Jenson calls 'metaphysical priority' or 'prior reality'). This is the kind of irreverent reflection to which one is provoked by an English as opposed to Continental training in philosophy, and one of my aims was to apply some English-type philosophical ideas to problems which are usually approached in the Continental manner. Dr Jenson did not register any reaction to this in his review; perhaps either because he considered the attempt too grotesque to be worth any attention, or because he thought that such material was irrelevant in a book which was supposed to be about theology. I wonder what his own view is on the relevance of this kind of philosophy to theology, with which I am obviously very much concerned?

Dr Jenson alleges that the indifference to eschatology which I point out was shown by medieval theologians and by the Protestant scholastics. But I am afraid that this is untrue, and, even if it were true, would be quite irrelevant. To take the second point first: if Smith claims that a schoolboy has made a mistake in a sum of long division, Jones's objection that other members of the class have made the same mistake has no bearing on the truth of his claim, though, to be sure, it may be interesting for other reasons. As to the first: I am not as well acquainted as I ought to be with the works of Gerhard, Polanus, Quenstedt or Turretinus; but I am pretty sure they all believed in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. It has been argued, for example by Moltmann, that these thinkers did not allow their eschatology to influence sufficiently the rest of their theology. This is certainly plausible, and may have influenced Dr Jenson in raising this objection against me; but it is not germane to the matter in hand.

I must concede to Dr Jenson that reference to the third volume of Tillich's *Systematic Theology* would have been a good thing, since it would have taken up little space, and would have made certain misunderstandings impossible. But since I was concerned with Tillich's *method*, and not to survey his theology as a whole, the first volume, part of which treats explicitly of method, was the one to refer to. The *Systematic Theology* as a whole is a work of truly magnifi-

cent consistency (in a way in which Barth's *Dogmatics*, for instance, is not), and nowhere transgresses the methodological principles set out near the beginning. The third volume is a masterly application of the Christian world-picture to the course of history and the affairs of the world; but never raises the question, with which I was concerned throughout my book, of what it is for this subjective picture to represent the *truth* about the world. If this is so, the remark of mine which Dr Jenson quoted is certainly not 'manifest nonsense'. On page 146 I wrote: '. . . one can read through the whole of the *Systematic Theology* without becoming any the wiser as to whether Tillich believes that, if Jesus had never existed, or if there were nothing to be hoped for beyond this life, Christians would have believed falsely.' To have written this sentence, and not to have read the third volume of the *Systematic Theology*, would surely require a greater measure of cheek than even Dr Jenson would be willing to ascribe to me. I am grateful to him, though, for pointing out that the third volume should have been included in the bibliography, and that reference to it in the text would not have come amiss.

There remain still a few minor points. (i) I don't 'purport' to warn the Church against certain general 'tendencies' of 'modern theology'. I present particular theses and arguments which I judge to be respectively false and invalid, and try to show why. (ii) Dr Jenson is unable to say 'whether the Roman Catholic Church needs this warning against Protestantizing'. But there was no such warning in the book; on the contrary, I *recommended* in the last chapter that Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians should learn from one another, and said, on pages 159ff., how much I thought the whole Christian Church should learn from Bonhoeffer. (iii) I am charged with 'leaving the impression that modern theology in general is being discussed'. I cannot understand *how* I managed to leave this impression, and very much regret doing so; I am sorry if Dr Jenson was misled either by the title or the blurb, in the first of which I merely acquiesced, for the second of which I was not responsible at all. As to the text of the book: I make it quite clear that I regard Bultmann and Gregor-Smith as largely, Robinson and Tillich as partly, Bonhoeffer and Barth as hardly if at all, guilty of the faults I have alleged. I make no 'material charge against modern theology' as such, and find it very surprising that I should seem to do so.

But the most interesting section of Dr Jenson's review is where he takes me to task on the matter of primary and secondary causes. This needs a whole *apparatus criticus* to itself. 'He gives no hint of how he proposes to overcome the notorious difficulties of this schema (1). And, of course (2), exactly those aspects of "modern theology" to which he objects are in fact last-ditch attempts so to conceive the reality of God within this fundamental schema as to guard at once the deity of God and the reality of man (3).' (1) No *hint* indeed; Chapters 2 and 3 (cf. particularly pages 54f. and 75ff.) deal with such

difficulties more or less explicitly and at length. If Dr Jenson would like to point out other outstanding ones which I have failed to mention, I will certainly give him some kind of answer. (2) This 'of course', I must confess, has me completely foxed! I honestly cannot conceive how anyone would see the ideas of God which I criticized as *defences*, and not rather *abandonments*, of the schema of primary and secondary causes; *a fortiori*, I don't find it obvious that they are so. This is another matter on which I would be grateful for enlightenment from Dr Jenson. And why retreat to the last ditch, when such tremendous first-ditch defences have been constructed by Bernard Lonergan? (3) So in spite of his comments in the rest of the review Dr Jenson concedes that my objections are valid in relation to *some* aspects of modern theology; I had no other objective than to convince the reader of this.

Some final remarks are called for. I apologize to the reader for the length of this reply; but such multifarious accusations of incompetence and carelessness take longer to rebut than to make. In general, I applaud the practice of severe reviewing, and think that it was proper and courageous of Dr Jenson so to attack a book which, rightly or wrongly, he considers to be disastrously bad. There is a serious lack of communication between theologians of very different philosophical sympathies, and the expression of acute disagreement is often blunted by a misapplied ecumenical sentiment and a charity which is really the fruit only of muddle and timidity. Our exchange may possibly do something to improve this state of affairs.

HUGO MEYNELL

Dr Meynell seems most upset by my opening sentences, aimed at just that clarification of the actual content of the work on which he now insists. He seems, moreover, to want to make of a disclaimer of the title and jacket of his book a sort of general cover against criticism. But the reader of my review will have seen that after this opening clarification, I try to discover the scope of the work itself and deal with that. In defence of those first four sentences, I will only say that since reviews are written partly for potential buyers and readers, so extreme a discrepancy between package and content does seem something that ought, at the start, to be pointed out.

After the first paragraph, I try to discover what the book is really about, a project in which I am now joined by Dr Meynell. I do not know if we disagree: I say it is about 'certain' aspects of modern Protestant theology, he insists it is about 'some'. I do say he does not make this clear, leaving the impression that modern theology in general is discussed. This certainly seems to me the case: the impression is given by the foreword he insists upon, when read without the italics he now supplies, and by the whole method of the book, which invariably contrasts the views attacked with 'the traditional view' rather than with other contemporary creative attempts.

So the book, as I said, is really about the 'dialectical theology' only, despite appearances. I then suggest that what he says the dialectical theologians do not do is not done by the 'traditional view' either. He says that even if this were true it would be irrelevant. But that F is true both of *a* and *b* does invalidate it as a criticism of *b*, if F is a comparison with what is supposed to be true of *a*—Dr Meynell's method throughout. He also says it is not true. And here I see I may have erred. I attributed to Meynell the programme of 'recovery of the theological relevance of historical inquiry' and 'recovery of an eschatology whose material content penetrates piety and theology'. In this I see I may have given him more credit—from my point of view—than he wants. Gerhard and the rest, like earlier theology, made all the proper assertions about Jesus and 'the last things'. If this by itself is the virtue Dr Meynell attributes to them, whether or not their eschatology moulded their faith in and concept of God; and if the criticism of dialectical theology is *merely* that they do not make these assertions, however much they may be seeking an historical and eschatological concept of God and human existence, then I confess Dr Meynell has made his case. But then this case seems a more trivial and truistic one than I dreamt of attributing to him, and the common concern I thought and said we had has vanished. Moreover, to the extent that our statements about God are not penetrated by the historical and eschatological character of our talk about Christ, they will not, at the last ditch, be falsified by the failure of that talk. Both Bultmann and the 'traditional' theology are finally in this case, and I cannot therefore accept Dr Meynell's central comparison.

I then refer to the way in which such diverse modern theologians as Moltmann, Pannenburg, Fuchs and Ebeling are working on the very project I thought he wanted. This is irrelevant, says Dr Meynell, because these are not the theologians he wanted to discuss. But these are not just any modern Protestants; the point, which I made explicitly, is that these efforts have grown out of the interior development of the very movements he attacks. Unless Dr Meynell now wishes to restrict the topic of his book to 'Bultmann', it is inadmissible to write as he does in the book without mentioning all this. Moreover, if Fuchs and Ebeling do not quite represent the position he attacks, no one now does except Herbert Braun.

So to the matter. I claim that Dr Meynell has ignored the concerns of the theologians he criticizes, and now that this is shown anew by his reply. If he cannot see anything in dialectical theology not in Braithwaite, then he can see little of what concerns the dialectical theologians—the van Buren who is supposed to have shown 'the ultimate identity of the Bultmann and the Braithwaite line' has indeed, I fear, been invented by someone other than God. Most vivid is his odd reply to my attempt to state the Bultmannians' concern: 'an ontology in which God and we are understood in terms

of the prior reality of the word' does not, obviously, mean that whatever is said to exist does; but that 'word' or 'event of communication' is the category with which to interpret the reality of God and ourselves. Since a word is addressed *to me*, and is what none of us has by himself, to conceive God as word is to break free even of the temptation to subjectivism. Or again, he says that if one has the Bultmannian's conception of faith, the attempt to show the relation of faith to past and future is doomed. But faith, for the Bultmannians, *is* a certain relation to past and future; the subjective attitude which *has* such a relation has been made up for them by Dr Meynell. Yet again, it *is* nonsense to say that for Tillich reconciliation is only a feeling, nor are Dr Meynell's present remarks germane. The third volume does not raise the question of what it is for 'this subjective picture' to be true of the world, because it contains no subjective picture, purporting to be a description of the world as it is because of reconciliation.

Finally, I did not say that Dr Meynell gave no hint of what problems he proposed to solve *using* the scheme of 'primary and secondary causes'—he seems to propose to solve *all* problems with it. I said he gave no hint of how he would solve the problems with the scheme itself. And I had thought some of these were notorious. If we call God 'cause' at all, immediately the human freedom, which he is supposed to cause, becomes problematic. To save this, we embark on a thousand qualifications of all statements about *what* he causes. The history of theology could be written as the history of these qualifications; at the end of the road is just that side of Bultmann or the *Commentary on Romans* that is disastrous: that nothing specific can be said directly about God.

Do I then agree that something is the matter with dialectical theology? Of course—something will be the matter with any theology. I even approved Dr Meynell's general location of the difficulty. But his book has little that is helpful, illuminating, or even accurate, to say about the difficulty—for the reasons we have just gone through again.

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