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Barthianism and the Divine Image of Man.

WHATEVER may be the merits or demerits of Barthianism, it has recalled us to Biblical theology—to this as distinct from the vague and various religious philosophisings which had usurped its place. Of this the doctrine of the Divine image in man provides a fair illustration. Under the influence of Hegelianism and humanistic philosophies, the Protestant liberalism of a past generation interpreted this doctrine in terms of the divinity of Humanity, and the vogue which this interpretation enjoyed would hardly have been possible but for a certain decline in Biblical theology. Now that idealistic monism and humanism are themselves suffering decline, the deification of Humanity and the humanisation of Divinity have ceased to be the preoccupation of our popular religious instructors. Indeed, the tendency has set in a different direction, and there is, in this regard, a not unreasonable feeling that Barthianism has carried its protest against the older liberalism too far. Under Barth, man, instead of being deified is, it is felt, in some danger of being dehumanised, and Berdyaev does not hesitate to class Barthian theology among the dehumanising influences in present-day thought. But in any case, it is in the field of Biblical theology that Barth gives battle, and there the controversy must be waged.

Those who speak to-day for a moderate evangelical liberalism, or a liberal evangelicalism, contend for a fuller recognition of man's competence as man, not indeed his competence for righteousness, but his competence to make his own human response to the righteousness and grace of God. They contend, that is to say, for a fuller recognition of this than Barthianism is disposed to concede. And they do this out of an evangelical concern that the Faith should be presented to the common man in terms that do not needlessly perplex and discourage him or contradict his experience and common-sense. We may cite this protest in the form in which it has been cast by one of our own greatly revered teachers. (The italics do not belong to the original).

In giving His Spirit . . . God comes very near to men; and as spiritual things are only spiritually discerned, *He reckons on finding that in men which makes them able to receive and appreciate His grace.* We may agree with the Barthians that this, too, is God's gift, *for God has indeed made men in His own image and likeness.* *It is this* which makes it possible

for men to hear His word and to respond, for, as Barth quaintly puts it, man is man and not cat.¹ And again: "If and when God speaks, it is not to sticks and stones but to human beings who are capable, however imperfectly, of hearing His word. Whether they obey it or forbear is their own lookout." And once more: "That we should experience a change of heart . . . is the *natural response* to grace freely given and received." The "receiving" is itself, presumably, part of this "natural" response, as also is the consequent "obeying"; and the response is "natural" because God has made man in the Divine image and likeness.

Now if those of us who are not professors of theology are to share in this discussion at all, we should do so with great deference and humility. Nevertheless, perhaps the discussion need not be confined to the experts, for it lies close to the life and thought of the ordinary Christian man, and something may be said from the layman's standpoint. Certainly an argument that rests upon the doctrine of the Divine image in man is not one with which the theological layman is likely to be wholly unfamiliar, so unfamiliar that he is unable to recognise the allusion. On the other hand it does not follow that the allusion will not mislead him. For admittedly, there are popular notions about man's being in the image and likeness of God which are by no means necessarily valid: for example, Browning's dictum, so pat as a pulpit quotation—

Take all in a word, the truth in God's breast
Lies trace for trace upon ours impressed:
Though He is so bright and we so dim,
We are made in His image to witness Him.

This certainly looks like the expression of a truism of the Faith, one of the first principles of Christian anthropology; but the Protestant theologian with qualms about Thomism and *analogia entis* might demur. In more generous form we have the statement of man's "natural" ability in Emersonian terms:

So nigh is grandeur to our dust,
So near is God to man,
When Duty whispers low, *Thou must,*
The Youth replies, *I can.*

And less familiarly:

In thousand far-transplanted grafts.
The parent fruit survives;
So, in the new-born millions,
The perfect Adam lives.

Wherefore—"Trust thyself; every heart responds to that iron"

¹ W. B. Selbie: *Christian World*, April 8, 1943.

string"! But again, the Protestant theologian might warn his lay brethren that Scriptural allusions do not necessarily certify the doctrines which they are made to adorn, and that in theology Emerson needs to be taken with evangelic salt. The new radicalism of Barth obviously cuts across all such interpretations and carries us back to the Calvinistic doctrine of man's inability: but this, of course, is precisely the matter under discussion. Barth so emphasises the Divine initiative in redemption as to deny any natural capacity in man effectually to respond to it; so that both initiative and response are of God. But surely, it is urged, this is to overrun the scent, in respect of both Scripture and experience, and amounts to a denial of that Divine image in man to which the Scriptures bear witness. It is in the field of Biblical theology that this question must be engaged.

I.

It is pertinent to begin, then, with the obvious fact that the *locus classicus* for the doctrine of the Divine image in man is the Creation passage in Genesis which contains the declaration that "God created man in His own image" or, as the Hebrew parallelism runs, in His own image and likeness. And it is to be noted that in the same passage the physical creation is described in the words "God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good": that is to say, the passage is descriptive of the world and man before the Fall. And here, of course, we are concerned only with the Scripture witness; what have been the various interpretative or critical reactions to it is another story. In the main, nineteenth century liberalism, while accepting the evolutionary conception of man and lightheartedly interpreting the Fall as a "fall upward" (associated with the development of the moral sense), retained the witness to the Divine image in man as holding true of the human race throughout the long ages of progress; increasingly true, perhaps; for the Divine image, nascent in the primitive tribes newly emerged from the subhuman, must itself be subject to the evolutionary process.

The immediate consideration is, however, that, so far as the classic passage in Genesis is concerned, the declaration about the Divine image refers specifically to man's sinless state in a world newly created and pronounced "very good." And the plain sense of later Scripture is that, by reason of human sin, that image and likeness of God in man has been lost or has suffered obscurity beyond man's own power to restore it. It is the "new man" in Christ (or, as Moffatt renders it, the new nature), that is *renewed* after the image, and for the knowledge, of the Creator (Col. iii. 10), so that as we have borne the image of the earthly, material, Adamic man, we are also to bear the image of the

heavenly Man (1 Cor. xv. 49), Himself the image of God (Col. i. 15), and thus to be *transformed* into that image through the operation of the Divine Spirit (2 Cor. iii. 18). On the other hand, the fallen sons of Adam, their ignorant minds grown dark (Rom. i. 21 Moffatt), have set themselves to make God in their own image (ver. 23), worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator.

The point is, that no Christian teaching that professes to ground its dogma upon the sense of Holy Scripture can consistently generalise the term "image of God" as if it were an unchallengeable truism of the Faith that man to-day bears that image in the original sense of the Scriptural pronouncement. It is not to say *more* than this; certainly not to say that man now bears no mark of the Divine image; it is simply to say that the Scripture teaching that man was created in the Divine likeness does not certify the conclusion that man retains that likeness with all its original implications, whatever those implications may be. It is to say that claims about man's "natural" ability to respond to the Divine initiative, to hear the Word, receive it and obey it, cannot be established by oracular statement and a gesture towards the Genesis expression. To do so, whatever might be its effect upon theologians, would be, in the end, to bewilder the common man—the common man of Protestantism, still retaining a Bible somewhere in the back room, still clinging to an ambiguous belief in it, and still capable under stress, even of reading it with an appropriate seriousness and attention.

II.

We come, then, to the question, What does the expression "in the image of God" mean? What are the implications of the term? And here again, it appears that we who are theological laymen ought to be warned against any too easy and assured citation of it, as if the expression itself had a precise and uncontroverted acceptance. It has been interpreted as meaning the *spirit* of man, as meaning his *rationality*, or again as meaning that mysterious gift by which man can both stand within the natural order *and* lift himself above it, can be himself as the knowing subject *and* transcend himself as the known object. Justin Martyr interpreted the Divine image as meaning rationality and moral freedom; Origen identified it with a pre-existent spirit sent to earth to work out what in Buddhism would be called its Karma. In a characteristic passage Chrysostom compares man with the lower creation, and inquires why he should be regarded as superior to it:

Dost thou build splendid palaces? Many jackdaws dwell in

houses more splendid . . . But art thou proud of thy voice? Thou canst by no means sing better than the swan or the nightingale. Is it for thy varied knowledge of the arts? But what is wiser in this than the bee? What embroiderer, what painter, what geometrician, can imitate her works? Is it for the fineness of thy apparel? But here the spiders beat thee. Is it for the swiftness of thy feet? Again the first prize is with the unreasoning animals. Hast thou travelled much? Not more than the birds . . . But art thou clear-sighted? Not as the gazelle, not as the eagle. Art thou quick of hearing? The ass is more so.

And so on, to show that what marks man out is the endowment of a mind that "in virtue and piety" can raise itself above man himself.

Augustine (*City of God*, Bk. XVI. ii) makes the Divine image centre in man's "good" will, the will of creaturely obedience, while the Fall meant the exchange of the good will for an evil will which set up a false autonomy and became an end in, and to, itself. Elsewhere (*Of the Work of Monks*) he places the image of God in the mind:

For where this image is [the Apostle] . . . doth himself declare, where he saith . . . 'put ye on the new [man] which is renewed according to the image of Him that created him.' Who can doubt that this renewing takes place in the mind? . . . For giving the same admonition he saith . . . 'be ye renewed in the spirit of your mind'.

In his dissertation *On the Creed* he is explicit: "God made man after His own image and likeness in the mind; for in that is the image of God." The mind, that is to say, is the *locus* of the Divine image; it is not the image itself; the image is there only in-so-far as the mind is turned Godward. Calvin places the Divine image in the integrity of man's whole being, body, soul and spirit, agreeing here with the Hebraic rather than the Greek conception; so that when man's integrity was lost the Divine image was lost; and Luther understands the same: "Of this image all we now possess are the words"—the mere term itself.

Calvin again, disagreeing here with Augustine, in his comment upon "the light that lighteth every man" in the Johannine Prologue, asserts a universal, natural enlightenment of the human mind by Christ.

From this *light* [of Christ] the rays are diffused over all mankind . . . For we know that men have this peculiar excellence which raises them above other animals, that they are endued with reason and intelligence, and that they carry

the distinction between right and wrong engraven on their conscience. There is no man, therefore, whom some perception of the eternal *light* doth not reach. But as there are fanatics who rashly strain and torture this passage . . . let us remember that the only subject here treated is the common light of nature . . . for never will any man, by all the acuteness and sagacity of his own mind, penetrate into the Kingdom of God.

The light of nature diffused over mankind, though it is a Divine illumination, shining "amidst the thick darkness and shocking ignorance, and gulf of errors", is not itself an *enabling* light; it is not identical with that Divine likeness in which man in his first integrity was able to respond to God and commune with Him.

So that (not to pursue the matter further) it is evident that even the significance of the term "image of God" has by no means been understood by all Christian authorities in the same way; and he would be a bold man who would claim that a reference to the Divine image in man should be sufficient to attest any one particular theory of man's natural ability or disability in relation to the things of God. Against any such claim the plain man, turned theologian in spite of himself, deserves to be warned and advised to consult the appropriate books of, say, Wheeler, Robinson and Reinhold Niebuhr.

III.

To say all this is to welcome the fact that the irruption of Barthianism has recalled us once more to Biblical theology, with all that this means and promises—among other things a closer examination of the roots of our popular anthropologies, Christian and otherwise. It is certainly not to claim sacrosanctity and infallibility for the Barthian oracle. Barth himself may well pray to be saved from the Barthians, some of whom find it easier to plagiarise his paradoxes and appropriate his head-lines than to discipline themselves to a patient examination of his thought. And indeed, Barth's thought is difficult to follow and harmonise. In a sermon included in a collection published under his and Thurneysen's names (*Come, Holy Spirit*, p. 184) we have this statement:

We are bearing the indestructible mark of God's image, even if we have forsaken God and have taken to gods and idols. God's image in man is the remembrance of the things that are above. They will not let go of us, but make life a long and restless search and discovery of ever new wants and quests. . . . We no longer know what were the things

that are above; we no longer understand ourselves. But ravished and extinguished, forgotten, and all but lost (and is there a man that will deny that we are speaking of him?), because it is God's image that we carry, we cannot be rid of them. The witness of Christ says that we are indissolubly bound from all eternity to this remembrance, in spite of every contrary experience. . . .

We may take it that this, put, as it is, into plain words (for Barth is here preaching to plain men), is a side-glance at a profound passage of Augustine in the *Confessions*. In this passage (*Confessions*, X. 19, 20) Augustine's neo-Platonism comes out in a doctrine of Recollection. God is primarily *in* the soul as its source and origin: He may be forgotten, and faith is a sort of remembering. "It is not as if we believed something new, but having remembered it we approve what has been said."

We have not entirely forgotten what we remember that we have forgotten. . . . How, then, do I seek Thee, O Lord? For when I seek Thee I seek a happy life. . . . How do I seek it? Is it by remembrance, as though I had forgotten it, knowing too that I had forgotten it? . . . Is not a happy life the thing that all desire? . . . How they come to know it I cannot tell, but they know it by some kind of knowledge unknown to me, who am in much doubt whether it be in the memory.

Kierkegaard interprets this by means of his strange category of "Repetition" or "remembering *forward*",—what might be called *Preminiscence*; and in fact, in his *Holy Ghost and the Christian Life* (p. 12), Barth cites this very passage and comments upon it, but with only a critical and partial approval.

How [thinks Augustine] could we come to know anything that somehow we had not previously known? How should God become enjoyable and worthy of our love, as the Supreme Good, unless we had some notion of the blessed life as well, even as we have other notions "in the more hidden cells of memory?" (Put into Kant's terminology "The capacity for transcendental apperception.").

Barth is concerned to qualify this. "The great opponent of Pelagianism", he says, "did not realise that righteousness by works as such was contained in this idea"—righteousness by an effort of spiritual memory, by an energetic, self-transcending, heavenward-soaring intellection. It is not, he continues, the knowledge of *God* that can be obtained, Platonic fashion, by reminiscence. "The sayings 'God has made us for Himself' and 'man made in the image of God,' are not to be taken as

meaning an abiding and sure fact of revelation that we have once and for all made our own." The fundamental disparity, the discontinuity, between God and man precludes the idea of God as an object of reminiscence: much more (as Augustine recognised) does it preclude the idea of a mystical identity as between the spirit of man and the Divine Spirit.

We must understand, then, that when Barth says that God's image in man is "the remembrance of the things that are above," his thought is upon the word in Ecclesiastes, which, in his sermons, he repetitively emphasises: "God hath set eternity in their heart," without which "no man can find out the work that God maketh." It is not a "potency of obedience," not a supernatural, super-added endowment of man's essential nature; it is that sense of Divine things of which we can never wholly rid ourselves, and which discovers to us those needs which only God can satisfy. In that sense, though the image of God may be obscured, the mark of it is indestructible.

In the first volume of his *Dogmatic* ("Doctrine of the Word of God" p. 273 f.) Barth is more definitive—and more controversial. He admits that apprehension of the Word of God could not take place without there being something in common, some point of contact, between God who speaks, and man who hears.

This point of contact is what theological anthropology, in correspondence with Gen. i. 27. calls the "image of God" in man. But . . . in this context we cannot possibly . . . mean by that the humanity and personality remaining over to sinful man from the creation: for the humanity and personality of sinful man simply cannot signify conformity with God, a point of contact with the Word of God. In this sense, as a possibility for God proper to man *qua* creature, the "image of God" is not only, as we say, with the exception of some remnants, ruined, but annihilated. What is preserved of the image of God even in sinful man is *recta natura*, to which as such a *rectitudo* cannot be ascribed. . . .

By "right nature", as distinct from rectitude of nature, we may presumably understand that, as a man with only one foot is still by nature a biped, or a man born blind is nevertheless by nature one who has eyes, so a sinful man, alienated from God, and incapable of a true response to God, is still by nature a being created for God. This, we may here understand Barth to mean, is what is preserved of the Divine image in man. Sin may corrupt man; it cannot cancel the aboriginal fact of his nature.

The fact also remains that apprehension of the Divine Word implies a point of contact, a something in common, between God

and man: but this, as Barth would argue, is not something reciprocally supplied by God and man out of their two natures; it is created by God Himself. Thus in-so-far as the image of God in man means a capacity for God, an ability to respond to Him and obey Him, it has to be restored in Christ. It exists for faith and in faith, and not out of faith; and faith itself is not a human faculty, but a supernatural gift. But in faith all does come back—the image of God, the “common ground”, the “point of contact”, even the “analogy of being”

IV.

At this point we shall do well to halt. The spirit easily becomes alienated from its proper interest, and the believer turns grammarian: and this surely belongs to the iniquity that besets us in our dealing with holy things. But let this be said: Those of us who have been trained from our childhood in the Calvinism of our evangelical fathers, and whose earliest and perhaps deepest and most lasting impressions have been associated with that instruction, are probably, whatever may have been the wanderings of our later years, unfitted for the task of criticism—of forming a critical estimate of Barthian doctrine, or at least of sympathising with those who react against Barth's insistence that even man's power of response to God is “of God”.

Of course, the age-long dispute about Divine sovereignty and human free-will must remain unsettled, and neither Barth nor his critics must be blamed for not disposing of it. There will always be those who emphasise human freedom over against those who emphasise sovereign grace, and in the Scriptures both emphases are supported without being resolved. But those of us who, in our most impressionable years, received the teaching that the mystery of regeneration begins *behind and beneath the consciousness* of man—that if we have turned to God it is because *He* has turned us—that if we are concerned to work out our own salvation it is because *He* works in us both to will and to work—those of us who have been so taught, and have so believed, and have had that belief confirmed within us, will not quarrel with Barth for emphasizing that side of the mystery, nor complain because, even so, the mystery remains a mystery.

Most truly, as Barth has said, when God speaks it is not to sticks and stones, but to men. But is it as axiomatic as it seems to be that men, as made in the Divine image, are capable, by reason of their own natural ability, to hear, respond, and obey? It is certainly not a statement to be made with finality by virtue of a mere reference to the Divine image. Nor is it necessarily something that is “rooted in the experience of the common man”—to the exclusion of the contrary view. If preachers

may be classed as common men, can we say that the evangelical preacher's experience when he faces his congregation must be that all his hearers, being not sticks and stones but men, are capable in themselves of hearing, really *hearing*, the Divine Word, apart from the direct operation of the Divine Spirit upon their incapable deaf ears? Was this the experience of Spurgeon, Whitefield, Luther? The preaching of the Gospel, said Luther, is like a moving rainstorm; when it strikes, it strikes. And what of the experience of the common man in the pew—the common man who hears and responds? Is he always content to say, "I myself, my own self, heard the Word, because in my own nature I was capable of hearing, and I myself, my own self, responded because by nature I was capable of responding"? This may all be possible, but there are deeper depths than these, and they have been sounded in the experience of common men. That they remain depths in which at last all thought is drowned does not make them a theological or psychological fantasy.

But when all this has been said, it remains to be recognised that Barthianism, vulnerable, and often extreme and ill-balanced as it is, does continually need, and prospers under, the corrective protest of those who are concerned for the fundamentals of human freedom and responsibility; this no less, and perhaps no more, than Christian humanism needs such a protest and corrective as Barth has been raised up to supply.

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