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Totalitarian Christianity

By

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ENGLISH-SPEAKING Christians having been for the most part brought up to believe that "Barthianism" represents the supreme height of theological indifference to social and political issues, it has been something of a surprise to them to find Barth himself being as outspoken as he has been in the past year or two on the subject of Nazism as a political system. It is consequently not uncommon to find this new development in Barth described by English and American writers as a "recantation." Barth himself, however, is not very willing to accept this description of his latest writings; and it is plain that if his English-speaking readers are to understand him as he understands himself, a bridge of some kind needs to be built for them between the "Church Dogmatics" and "The Church and the Political Problem of our Day."

The key to a true understanding of Barth's apparent change of front lies, I suspect, in an appreciation of the fact that Barth's earlier attacks on the "social gospel," and severe restriction of his own interests to theology in a rather narrow way, at no time implied a denial of the possibility of theology sometimes having light to throw on social and political problems. What they did imply, however, and in a sense included, was a very rigorous *critique* of all pronouncements on such problems claiming to be "Christian." Before the crisis of September, 1938, Barth considered that the best service he could perform was the negative one of showing how very seldom such pronouncements really established this claim. In his lectures on "The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life," for example, he spoke very sarcastically of the easy way in which we talk about "Christian journalism," "Christian education," "Christian economics," "Christian sociology," and so on. More recently, however, he has felt a stronger responsibility to attempt to say one

or two things about the duties of the Christian as a citizen which, in his opinion, do come up to the strict conditions on which alone such utterances can claim to find a place in Christian theology.

If this reading of Barth's intentions is a correct one, the requisite "bridge" can best be provided by a statement of this critique of Christian social and political pronouncements which is implicit both in Barth's earlier writings on "pure" theology and in his more recent attempts to make such pronouncements himself. It can best be provided, in other words, by a statement of the principles by which Barth has all along evaluated the claims of utterances on social and political questions to be considered "theological" utterances.

Barth has always made it abundantly clear that his Christianity is intended to be an "all-or-nothing" Christianity. His best-known popularizer, Dr. W. A. Vesser t'Hooft, has aptly, if provocatively, called it "totalitarian Christianity." That is, Barth believes that in everything that a man thinks or does, either he thinks and acts as a Christian or he does not. There is no middle way. Christianity knows no second-bests. Of course, even the most faithful of Christians is never perfect, even in his faith, but that is what he must try to be. It is also true that we must exercise towards others the "judgment of charity," and recognize that in the last resort it is only God who knows whether a man is really trying to be a Christian or not—whether or not his actions are really done "in faith." The true Church is known only to God. But our own aim, for ourselves, must always be to act as Christians—to obey our Lord. Moreover, what we *call upon* others to do must never be anything less than to act as Christians.

In the language of Martin Buber, the absoluteness of Christianity is to be seen in the "dimension" in which we use the pronouns "I" and "Thou." Our "I" listens to the "Thou" of God and ventures to pronounce it to others, however cautious we must be in the other world of discourse in which we talk *about* people in the third person. Understanding the matter in this way, we can say that between Christianity and every other mode of thought and life there is an absolute gulf fixed, and anything that is not already inspired by the Spirit of Christ is not even on the way to becoming so. "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin."

This "all-or-nothing" principle must be kept in mind even when we are considering our duties as citizens. We are very apt to say that patriotism, even when it is in no sense Christian patriotism, is still patriotism, and is a good thing as far as it goes. It is, as we say, a step in the right direction. But if Christianity is really as "totalitarian" as Barth makes it out to be—and as, I am convinced, the New Testament makes it out to be—this is absolutely false. It is trying to serve two masters, and tempting others to serve two masters.

Once again, we must, of course, exercise towards others the judgment of charity, and remember that no one but God knows whether any man's patriotism is really *Christian* patriotism or not. Perhaps often unexpected people—e.g., people who do not go to Church—are secretly moved by the Spirit of Christ. The real Christian patriot may be a man who is very shy of describing himself in these terms. It is also possible that the man who is most loud-voiced in describing his patriotism as "Christian" is deluding himself and others with words—saying "Lord, Lord" without really obeying or even sincerely attempting to obey Christ's will. You cannot make patriotism or anything else genuinely Christian merely by putting a Christian label on it. All this, however, does not alter the fact that patriotism which is not secretly or openly Christian is not a real virtue. Like all the other pagan "virtues," it is just, in Augustine's words, a "splendid sin."

Nothing in this whole world is absolutely sacred in itself. There is nothing sacred in itself even in our country and our national heritage. That does not mean that a Christian has no duty to love his country. It does not even necessarily mean that it is wrong for a Christian to fight for his country—Barth himself is in fact exceedingly definite in his opinion that it is *not* wrong. But if a Christian loves his country, and if he fights for his country, it must never be because there is anything sacred about his country in itself, but only because that is one of the ways in which Christ has commanded us to serve Him, and our brethren in Him.

It is wholly wrong and un-Christian to say that we must teach men to love and reverence their country first, and afterwards teach them the additional duty of being Christians. Patriotism is not a half-way-house to Christianity. Nor,

for that matter, is pacifism or socialism. There are no half-way-houses to Christianity. Patriotism may be a *part* of Christianity, part of the expression of our Christian faith and of our love to those for whom Christ died ; and it may even be the first part of it that some men wake up to ; but when it is *not* a part of Christianity it is certainly not a prelude to it but something entirely wicked and heathen.

The practical outward difference which these principles make will sometimes be very great, and sometimes quite negligible. For a large part of the time Christian patriots and other patriots, Christian citizens and other citizens, may be doing exactly the same things and doing them side by side. Perhaps, for example, people who are serving their country for the love of Christ and people who are serving it out of an idolatrous worship of their Fatherland are now fighting side by side on the battlefield. Perhaps pacifists whose action is being taken "in faith" and pacifists of quite a different kind are facing the same tribunals, and objecting to the same things. And it is not our business, it is not within our power, to judge who are performing their civil duties (whatever they may be) for the right reasons and who are not. In his letter to a French pastor on "The Church and the War" reproduced in "Theology" for March of this year, Barth said along these lines, "*Il faut en finir!*" said your Prime Minister in the hour of decision, and his English colleague repeated this declaration. The question as to how deep this resolve and this determination goes may safely be left to the sense of responsibility of these statesmen. It is certain that every Christian, too, who has followed the last years with his eyes and ears opened, must, just because he is a Christian, give his own Yea and Amen to this '*Il faut en finir!*'"

All that we can do, and this we must do, is to make sure that when *we* are performing our duties we are doing so for Christian reasons, and that when we appeal to others to do so—either individually or through the official spokesmen of our Church—our appeal is always on Christian grounds. Nor is this such a small matter as it may seem. It means, for example, outspoken words (when they are needed) on the appeals to un-Christian passions which even people in positions of responsibility are sometimes tempted to make in the stress of a struggle like the present one. And it

means equally outspoken words about pacifist utterances which appeal merely to self-interest and the desire to be comfortable.

Points are always reached, moreover, when our reasons for action do make a difference to what it is that we do and to the company in which we do it. It is not easy to lay down in advance where these points are, but we must be always on the watch for them, and never forget that being a Christian cannot mean merely doing what everybody else does (though, of course, it does not mean merely doing the opposite to what everybody else does either). It is plain that on matters directly touching the public confession of his faith the Christian's decisions are most likely to be distinctive, though even here hypocrites may make the same outward decisions as Christians, while on the other hand, we cannot exclude the possibility of distinctively Christian decisions being made at other points.

Perhaps, for example, a Christian will show a greater concern about what sort of a country it is he is serving than will a man who regards his country as sacred in itself; or, on the other hand, he may show less anxiety about this than a man who is so preoccupied with the visionary Utopia he would like his country to be that he has no time to help people here and now. On all these questions we must decide for ourselves in the light of God's Word, with as much help as we can secure from the Church as an institution and from individual fellow-Christians.

All these principles seem simple enough. And it is equally easy to see that they are in full accord both with Barth's earlier writings and with his later ones. Perhaps they will help to provide that "missing link" between the two of which his English-speaking readers feel the need.