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Recent Trends in American Theology

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IT is with some trepidation that I attempt the task of giving an account of recent movements in theological thinking in America.

I have tried to keep in touch with some of the more important books which have appeared, and I have been privileged to have many talks with American scholars and teachers. Yet I am still conscious of the fact that I myself belong to another tradition. I have not grown up within the world of American thought, and so vast is this country, and so varied are the cross-currents of its theological expression, that it is almost impossible for the outsider to describe the theological scene with any precision or assurance. Even Dean Sperry, in his admirable book *Religion in America*, touches very lightly on the theological situation, and it is not easy to know where to turn to obtain a first-hand account, by an American himself, of the way things are moving. I must therefore do my best while asking my readers to bear in mind that it may be only a partial or one-sided account that I shall present.

I.

Perhaps one of the first things that needs to be said is that the specifically British influence upon recent American thinking has been comparatively small. Temple was greatly admired, almost revered, but it was probably his deep concern over social questions which made the greatest appeal to the American mind. John Baillie is well-known, having spent several years of his teaching life in Toronto and New York; but I am not aware that his particular message has left any deep mark upon the general theological outlook. C. H. Dodd and T. W. Manson have gained full recognition from New Testament scholars, and amongst our theologians probably the best known are Leonard Hodgson and H. H. Farmer, each of whom served for a while on the Professorial staff of an American seminary. But by and large it would be true to say that between the wars British thought made no deep impact upon American life, though in the last few years its influence has tended to increase. A number of the best British books have been re-published in America and are taking the place of the continental literature which is no longer available.

This brings me to my second general remark, which is to the effect that the *continental* influence upon American thinking has been comparatively large. Between the wars far more American post-graduate students went to Germany than to Britain, and within the membership of the Protestant Churches of the U.S.A. a considerable proportion would be found to be of German stock. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was from America that the first translation of a book of Karl Barth's came. Brunner himself did graduate work at Union Theological Seminary, and his son has recently been following

in his father's steps. It was Richard Niebuhr who first introduced the writings of Paul Tillich to the English-speaking world. The writings of Barth have been avidly read. Brunner has lectured in America at different times, and during one academic year was Guest Professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. Recently his major works have been re-printed in Philadelphia, and an important new volume, *Revelation and Reason*, has also appeared. Significantly, too, most of Kierkegaard's works have been translated in America, and one may see shelves in students' rooms almost filled with his books. Thus the influence of Continental writings has been quite remarkable. To this must be added the influence of those who have studied under Continental teachers and have made themselves acquainted at first-hand with much of the German literature.

But perhaps most important of all, the rise of the Nazi régime meant that a number of Germany's outstanding thinkers found refuge in the hospitable Colleges of the U.S.A. An outstanding example is that of Paul Tillich. He was a leading Christian Socialist in Germany after the last war, and took a prominent part in public affairs in the '20s. In the early '30s, however, he had to leave Germany and finally settled at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he has wielded a powerful influence, especially amongst graduate students. He has contributed a number of articles of first-rate importance to American theological journals, but his only books at present available in English are *The Religious Situation* and *The Interpretation of History*. A composite volume, containing a penetrating essay of his, is shortly to appear in this country, and some day we may hope to see his systematic theology in print. If that day does arrive it will constitute something of a landmark in the history of theological studies. Besides Paul Tillich, there is Otto Piper, who, after giving a number of lectures in this country, settled at Princeton, where he is now Professor of New Testament. Piper is a man of great learning, exceedingly thorough in all his work and deeply concerned to draw out the theological significance of New Testament studies. Then there is Wilhelm Pauck, a distinguished Church Historian, at Chicago, and Richard Kroner, a philosopher-theologian, at Union. There can be no doubt that Germany's folly has meant the enrichment of American thought not only in theological but also in other fields of study. And in addition, America has given refuge to such scholars as Hromadka, the Professor of Theology in Prague, whose book *Doom and Resurrection* was published by the S.C.M. not so long ago. Thus the Continental influence in America has been and still is strong, and the majority of Professors in the leading Seminaries would be entirely at home in German theological literature as well as in that of the English-speaking world.

II.

Turning now to American theologians themselves, there are two who have won such fame in this country that it is only necessary to refer to them briefly. The first is Reinhold Niebuhr, another member of the distinguished faculty of Union Theological Seminary. After a pastorate in Detroit in which he saw the social problems of a great

industrial centre at first-hand, Niebuhr set to work to apply the great affirmations of the Christian faith within the context of the political and social disorder of our own time. In his classes and in his books, in and through special lecturerships, and particularly through his Gifford Lectures, Niebuhr has succeeded in speaking to our own day and generation in a way that few others have done. He has a remarkable influence in secular literary and political circles, and his own output in writing seems to be exhaustless. Undoubtedly he has brought theology into the very midst of modern life in a way which no one else save William Temple has succeeded in doing in recent times. His style of writing has improved during the years, and his public addresses are of an altogether prophetic quality, both in their content and in their manner of delivery.

The other name which is widely known in Britain is that of K. S. Latourette. With a valuable background of missionary experience, and with first-hand knowledge of China behind him, Latourette has been able to serve the missionary cause by sending out from his professorial headquarters at Yale a truly prodigious amount of written work related in one way or another to the growth of the universal Church of Christ. His *magnum opus* on *The Expansion of Christianity* is now complete and will surely remain for many years the standard work of its kind. One is left wondering what Latourette will find to turn his hand to next.

Another name which may not be so well-known in England, though it is familiar beyond the Border, is that of John A. Mackay. A graduate of Aberdeen University, Mackay took his theological training at Princeton and then pursued a course of post-graduate study in Spain in order to prepare himself for missionary work in S. America. For a number of years he gave distinguished service in that country, particularly in university circles and amongst the intelligentsia. Then, after serving for a short time on the Home staff of his missionary society, he was called to be President of Princeton Theological Seminary some ten years ago. During this time he has made a real impact on the theological life of America. He has lectured widely, he has written *A Preface to Christian Theology*, which has exercised a remarkable influence beyond the bounds of his own country, and he has launched the periodical *Theology To-day*, which quickly established itself as one of America's foremost religious journals. A favourite phrase of Dr. Mackay's—it appears on the cover of the journal—is "The Life of Man in the Light of God," and this motto has governed all his work. Standing for a truly Evangelical and Reformed theology, he has yet sought to keep constantly in touch with modern movements, especially in the cultural field and in the field of Biblical studies. The positive, Biblical theology to which he and the contributors to *Theology To-day* seek to bear witness, has, one hopes and believes, become a real stabilizing force in the American theological scene.

It may be of interest, at this point, to mention a few of the names associated with *Theology To-day* and its general outlook. Amongst these is Richard Niebuhr, the Dean of Graduate Studies at Yale Divinity School, who is not so well-known in this country as is his

distinguished brother. His book on *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* is, however, a quite fascinating study of the relation between social and religious forces in the life of the Church, and his study of *The Meaning of Revelation* is as profound as anything that has been written on the subject. Coming further east, there are two Professors at the Andover-Newton Theological Seminary on the edge of Boston whose writings are receiving considerable attention. Nels Ferré, a man of Swedish extraction, has begun to produce a series of books which will together constitute a new systematic theology. His books are not easy to read, being in the style of some of the more abstract of continental writers, but they contain real theology which does not remain aloof from the problems of our day. Secondly, Paul Minear, having contributed a number of thought-provoking articles to religious journals, has recently produced a major work, *Eyes of Faith*, which is to be published in England as soon as conditions permit. This is called a study in the Biblical point of view, but is actually one of the best introductions to Biblical theology which I have yet seen. It is well written, it reveals an astonishing command of the Biblical material, it deals with such questions as the use of "signs" and eschatology in a most illuminating way, and in general is representative of a real concern for Biblical theology which is one of the features of contemporary American life. This same concern for a positive, Evangelical theology is also represented in the writings of Edwin Lewis, the Professor of Theology at Drew University (a remarkable book by a younger colleague of his, Stanley Hopper, is soon to be published in England—its title *The Crisis of Faith*), and of George Thomas, a lay-theologian who is Professor of Religious Thought at Princeton University.

In the field of Biblical studies generally, excellent work has been done in recent years in America, particularly along what might be called the more technical lines. Post-graduate work in archeological and linguistic studies has been encouraged and some fine books on the ancient history of Bible lands have been produced. By general consent one of the outstanding names in this connection is that of W. F. Albright, of Johns Hopkins University, a man who has given admirable guidance to research students and has himself written such an authoritative book as *From the Stone Age to Christianity*. Millar Burrows, of Yale, is another leader in this field of study. His book *What Mean These Stones?* has won high praise, while on the more literary side Robert H. Pfeiffer's *Introduction to the Old Testament* has become almost a standard work of reference, however much some of his theories may be open to question. In New Testament studies, Frederick C. Grant, of Union Seminary, has done valuable pioneer work, and a number of younger writers are showing signs of the more theological approach to the documents such as is being evidenced in this country. As an indication of the importance attached to Bible study at the present time, mention may be made of the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament and the Westminster Historical Atlas, both of which are now obtainable in England; and of two major projects, the Westminster Study Bible and the Interpreter's Bible, both of which are being actively carried forward at this

very moment. The Study Bible is to be a one-volume book containing the text of the A.V., together with prefaces to the various books and annotations to the text. The Interpreter's Bible is to run to several volumes, and will deal with each book of the Bible both from the purely exegetical and also from the homiletic point of view. Meanwhile, work is going steadily ahead on the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament, and there is every prospect that we may at last be provided with a Revised Version of the Bible which will serve the needs both of the scholar in his study, the worshipper in the congregation, and the ordinary man at his devotions.

III.

In the final section I propose to refer briefly to certain men and movements within the Protestant Episcopal Church of the U.S.A. Although reasonably close contacts have been maintained over the years between the Church of England and the General Theological Seminary in New York, there have, so far as I know, been comparatively few contacts with the other Seminaries of the Episcopal Church, and in particular there have been all too few links between Evangelicals in this country and those associated with the Virginia Theological Seminary at Alexandria or the Episcopal Theological School at Cambridge, Mass. Canon Max Warren's visit to America in 1943-4 helped greatly to make initial contacts, and it is much to be hoped that in years to come there will be more intercourse between those of Evangelical outlook within the two Churches.

That the more Evangelical wing of the Episcopal Church is alive and progressive was made abundantly clear when the volume of essays entitled *Anglican Evangelicalism* was published about four years ago. It was a real achievement for one Seminary to produce so weighty a volume from the ranks of its own present or former members of Staff. Moreover, the book revealed that amongst Evangelicals in the U.S.A. there was a firm witness to a positive theology, together with a warm enthusiasm for the whole missionary work of the Church. One of the notable contributions to the book was that made by Dr. Charles Lowry, who was then Professor of Systematic Divinity at the Virginia Seminary, though he has since become Rector of a church in the neighbourhood of Washington. As readers of this article may remember, Dr. Lowry had the distinction of being chosen by Archbishop Temple to write his Lenten book for 1946, and the book was also chosen as the Presiding Bishop's Lenten Book in the U.S.A. We may, I feel sure, look forward to a major work of theological scholarship from Dr. Lowry before many years have passed.

Another writer whose recent book has already made an impression in England is Canon Theodore Wedel, author of *The Coming Great Church*. Dr. Wedel is Warden of the very remarkable institution, the College of Preachers, in Washington, D.C. This College is a beautiful building, standing close to the great new Cathedral which is arising on the outskirts of the capital. Parish ministers from every part of the United States come for a course lasting 3-4 days, and at all these courses, of which there may be 20 or more within the year,

Canon Wedel is the presiding genius. Normally an outside Lecturer is responsible for the teaching work of the course, but in other ways Canon Wedel provides the inspiring leadership which has made the College so valuable an institution in the life of the Church. His book recently published reveals a fine ecumenical spirit, and contains one of the best treatments of the vexed question of episcopacy which has so far appeared.

Though Episcopal scholars have taken a full share within the general theological life of the U.S.A., there have naturally been certain more domestic issues which have engaged their attention rather fully. One of these has been the question of the Church's attitude to divorce and to the remarriage of divorced persons. In facing this question the attempt has been made to set the ethical issue within its theological context and not to be stampeded into making decisions through any merely popular pressure. But the more burning question, which has raised serious theological issues, has been that of Reunion, and it is necessary to speak of this in some detail.

It was in 1937 that the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church made an overture to the Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A., and in the following year the General Assembly of the latter Church cordially accepted the invitation to join the Episcopal Church in accepting the following declaration :

"The two Churches, one in the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, recognizing the Holy Scriptures as the supreme rule of faith, accepting the two Sacraments ordained by Christ and believing that the visible unity of Christ's Church is the will of God, hereby formally declare their purpose to achieve organic union between their respective churches."

Since 1937 joint commissions have laboured, but it was not until last summer that a definite agreed proposal was put forward for the consideration of the General Convention which was due to meet in September. This proposed basis of union had been recommended by the representatives of the two Churches for study, and if adopted would have become the basis for further negotiations, looking toward the drafting of a Constitution. Unfortunately, however, the Episcopal representatives on the Commission were divided in regard to the proposed Basis. Ten members, including the Chairman, Bishop Strider of Virginia, the Secretary, Dean Zabriskie of the Virginia Seminary, Canon Wedel, Professor Sherman Johnson of the Episcopal School at Cambridge, and Professor George Thomas of Princeton, supported the proposal. Seven members—of whom two were Bishops—signed a minority report. Already it was evident that the Church was divided on the issue, and when the General Convention met, the Basis of Union was not even adopted for study. Instead, a substitute motion was carried, directing the Commission on Approaches to Unity to draw up a statement, based on the Lambeth Quadrilateral, of the conditions on which the Episcopal Church is prepared to enter "into inter-communion and organic federation" with another Church, and to ask the Presbyterians to do the same. Whether or not the Presbyterians will agree to this proposal remains to be seen. It was apparent at their General Assembly last summer, that they were beginning to

feel some impatience in regard to the whole matter. It was the Episcopal Church which had initiated the conversations, and yet nearly nine years had passed without any concrete proposal being made. There would be every justification for the Presbyterians to refuse now to proceed further in the matter, though it is greatly to be hoped that a movement which seemed to hold such great promise within it will not simply fade away without anything definite being accomplished.

Undoubtedly the decision of the General Convention was in the nature of a setback to the Evangelical leaders within the Episcopal Church. No one has worked harder or more patiently than the Secretary of the Commission, Dr. Zabriskie. It was something of a triumph that he and those associated with him were able to bring forward a proposal acceptable to the Presbyterians and to the majority of the Anglicans. It was frankly recognized that there are within the uniting Churches different views regarding episcopacy. Yet it was agreed that the continuity of the episcopate should be maintained, both at the inauguration of union and thereafter. In regard to the Presbyterate, provision was made for formal services of mutual recognition and extension of authority to minister in the united Church at such time as union might be effected. All ordinations were to be by the bishop and presbyters, who would join in the laying on of hands. Provision was also made that bishops should be consecrated by the laying on of hands, both by bishops (at least three) and by presbyters.

Those signing the minority report were convinced, however, that "the proposals radically distort the religion of our Lord." They denied that the Presbyterians had accepted the episcopate "save in the most Pickwickian sense." Everything for them turned on the fact that "only a bishop can validly ordain." But it was their belief that the Presbyterians regarded all—bishops, priests and deacons alike—as on the same level of authority, and that they rejected altogether the Prayer Book idea of the priesthood. Indeed, they went so far as to say that the suggested proposals would, if carried out, ultimately do away with the Prayer Book and cut the Episcopal Church off from "the Anglican orbit of Churches." Thus they concluded that "the present Proposals would move us farther and farther from any of the great historic Catholic Communion, and that in fact we should become rather a laughing-stock before the eyes of Christendom in any claim to be a 'Bridge Church.'"

Before the Convention met, an important article appeared in the *Christian Century* from the pen of Professor Sherman Johnson, taking up the objections of the minority one by one and dealing with them in convincing fashion. In particular, he fastens upon the idea of the "bridge church," of which such use has been made in Anglican circles over a long period. (An editorial in the same issue of the *Christian Century* makes the caustic remark that "this conception has long been used as a rationalization of inaction by the Episcopal Church. It affords a retreat to which too many of its leaders repair whenever a concrete decision in the realm of unity has to be made.") "My answer," Dr. Johnson writes, "is that right now we are a huge

bridge church standing in the middle of the stream with almost no approaches at either end. The practical question is, At which end are we to start building the approaches? If we look at one side of the river, we observe the Roman Catholic Church, interested in union only on its own terms. . . . We have great respect for the Eastern Orthodox, and we would no doubt have much to gain from closer fellowship with them. But our people would in any event have little contact with the Orthodox, either in the United States or in any of our mission fields. Furthermore, until the Orthodox have faced squarely the issues raised by the Reformation, modern science and the new biblical learning, and until they are more free from state control than they now are, it will be impossible to achieve a meeting of minds. . . . On the other side of the river stands historic Protestantism, of which the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. is one of the noblest representatives. Our people understand Protestantism. The vast majority of them consider themselves Protestants. We have a great work to do in company with the other evangelical churches, and if we can find closer fellowship with them, while still making our distinctive contribution, this is the logical and natural direction for us to proceed."

IV.

It has seemed desirable to speak of the Reunion question at some length, for it is within this area of thinking that the sharpest divergencies have appeared within the Episcopal Church. On the one side men like Bishop Manning, of New York, and Bishop Conkling, of Chicago, have taken an intransigent attitude in regard to the "Catholic" character of the Episcopal Church, and from the more scholarly angle, a thesis comparable to that of the contributors to *The Apostolic Ministry* has been argued by Professor Norman Pittenger, of New York. On the other side, a more moderate and eirenic attitude has been adopted by the former Presiding Bishop, Bishop Tucker, and by his successor in that office, Bishop Sherrill, while valuable contributions have been made on the scholarly side by Professor Cyril Richardson, also of New York. At the moment the outlook is uncertain, and it may well be that no further progress will be made until after the Lambeth Conference in 1948. Meanwhile, it is certain that the Evangelical leaders in the Episcopal Church will not cease in their efforts to stand for a positive and constructive Anglicanism, while seeking, in every way possible, to foster good relations with the other Protestant communions in the U.S.A.

Readers may feel that this article, which was designed to give some idea of recent theological trends in the U.S.A., has paid too much attention to the work of particular men and to discussions which have been confined to just two Communions. My excuse must be that I do not find it easy to define "trends" or new "movements" within the theological scene over the past few years. That there has been a growing interest in theology, and a greater willingness to search for the theological principles lying behind practical issues, I am convinced. But it is, perhaps, by better acquaintance with the leaders of theological thought and their writings that we shall be able to judge for ourselves what are the matters of major importance in the theological life of America to-day.