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Harnack Revised

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HARNACK'S famous thesis, that the development of Christian dogma came about by the "acute Hellenization" of the original message, is still *sub judice*, and it is possible to accept it as a judgment of fact while repudiating the judgment of value that accompanied it in the first instance. Thus, from the Catholic side, the followers of Newman have maintained that it was divinely meant that a revelation given to Israel should be assimilated to Greek culture and so become universal instead of provincial. On the Protestant side, it has been urged that the Fathers, Irenaeus and Athanasius in particular, are much more Biblical and less metaphysical than Harnack averred, and that, while the form of doctrine changed, its content was not seriously affected by the process. Again, those who accept Harnack's principle may quarrel with him as to its application. But none of these critics would carry revision so far as would Martin Werner in the brilliant and informative survey *Die Entstehung des christlichen Dogmas*, now in its second edition. It will come as a surprise to those in Britain who fondly imagined that Schweitzer was discredited to learn that he is the inspiration of the new and vigorous school of thought to which Werner belongs.

Werner accepts Harnack's thesis as established, but finds a grave omission in the execution of his project. He has not been able to give an answer to the question: What was it in the Christian message or its original situation that laid it open to the possibility of Hellenization? It is not sufficient to say with him that Apostolic Christianity was in part Jewish and in part universal, and that the latter won for it acceptance by the Graeco-Roman world, while the former had to be dropped. For, as he is forced to admit, Hellenistic Christianity was soaked in the Old Testament. Werner, on the other hand, finds the key to the whole process in the breakdown of the early expectation of the Lord's return, the end of the age, and the inauguration of the Messianic era. Christianity began, not with a simple message of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, but with an elaborate dogma, derived from late-Jewish apocalyptic. Jesus took over from *Enoch* in particular this whole scheme, modifying it only by identifying himself with *Messias designatus*. Apostolic Christianity received it from him, and revised it in the light of his death and resurrection as the events in which the powers of the age to come were already at work. But a later generation had to reckon with the hard fact that the End did not come, history continued on its course as before.

The decisive factor in the development of Christian dogma was thus the necessity of "de-eschatologizing" the original message. That was the work pre-eminently of the post-apostolic age, and there are instances in which

Werner illuminates his subject by drawing on the apocryphal Gospels and Acts to explain how the Church's accredited thinkers reached their results. But the post-apostolic age is not to be put off to the second century; it begins already in the New Testament, even in the Synoptic Gospels. It has long been widely held that the Fourth Gospel takes cognisance of the need for de-eschatologizing and that the Pastoral Epistles know of the Church as a saving institution; the curious reference in II Peter 1:4 to becoming "partakers of the divine nature" has often been suspect. In other words, the acceptance of post-apostolic books as apostolic and their inclusion in the canon was at once one of the ways in which the Church adjusted itself to the new situation and made further adjustments possible. But the process did not stop there; the Nicene Creed and the Reformation are marks in its advance.

On Werner's view, three tendencies can be detected at work in the post-apostolic period. The situation out of which all three arise is that of the dissolution of the Pauline world-view in particular. What was originally a whole now breaks up into a number of fragments, each of which may be taken up for itself and so acquire a meaning it did not have in the original context. In the first place, there are the heretics, notably the Gnostics and the Arians; these sometimes preserve not a little of the Pauline construction, but they fail in the end either because, as in the case of the Gnostics, they misunderstand its terminology at a crucial point, or, with Arius, they reproduce a form of thought that does not meet the needs of a later time. In the second place, there is the Old Catholic Church with the thinkers who retained a place among the orthodox; in this sphere Pauline ideas were sometimes retained with little understanding, and at times positions he had held were actually branded as heretical. In the third place, the Alexandrians Clement and Origen had the courage to deal freely with traditional material and offered a version of the Christian faith that, though soon judged heretical, is worthy of our respect today.

We may consider first what Werner's approach yields for the development of *the doctrine of redemption*. The New Testament starting-point of this is defined in Schweitzer's terms. That is to say, Jesus expected salvation as a cosmic event, the overthrow of Satan by the mighty power of God, and that in the near future. He himself was cast for a decisive role in connection therewith, and would come again as God's viceregent. Paul looked back on the Cross and Resurrection as the points at which this saving event had already broken into history, though the consummation was still reserved for the future. Christ "gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us out of this present evil world". He abolished the old order under which we live and introduced us into the new and final order of God himself. In his death he therefore joined issue with and overthrew the cosmic forces, the angels, the law, sin, and death, all the tyrannies that held men in their grip. The death of Christ was his victorious encounter with all these spirit-powers and

the end of their reign. And the Christian participates in this cosmic salvation when in baptism he dies with Christ and rises again, to enter already into the life of the age to come. As Paul puts it more than once, he dies to the flesh. "Ye are not in the flesh, but in the spirit."

In all this, Paul formulates a confidence he holds in face of the speedy end of the world. With the passing of that confidence the magnificent construction fell to pieces. It was not disavowed, but its various aspects became distinct theologoumena, to be developed each on its own. As an example of this we may take Paul's message of freedom from the law. As he saw it, Christ by his death has annulled the old order, of which the law was a part. Clearly therefore the law can have no claim on the Gentile, though there is no reason why the born Jew should break with it, since "the time is short" and the Parousia will put an end to it once and for all. No one could think in those terms once the hope of the Parousia had begun to fade. But the problem of the Christian's relation to the law remained. Marcion thought he understood Paul; but he did not, he caricatured him. Yet perhaps he came nearer to the great apostle than did the Church, which helped itself out with such expedients as a distinction between the moral parts of the law that were permanently valid and the ceremonial parts that were for Israel only. Not to mention the suggestion that Christ was himself the angel through whom the law was mediated in the first instance!

Another part of the original conception that came loose from its setting in Paul was the victory of Christ over the angelic powers. Much depended here on the interpretation of I Corinthians 2:6-8 and there is evidence that the early Fathers were not unaware what Paul meant by this. But it was replaced in the main by a fantasy-creation, the *descensus ad inferos*. This took two forms. For some, Christ descended into the underworld between his death and resurrection to preach and administer baptism; for others, especially the writers of popular literature in the second century, he went there to compel Satan to give up the souls he held in bondage. In the first case a problem was being dealt with that had not arisen for Paul, that of how the elect of the pre-Christian ages were to participate in the final salvation wrought by Christ. They could not now be left in Hades till the few years elapsed before the Lord returned, bringing redemption to them. In the second form of the *descensus ad inferos* there is a striking shift in emphasis; the death of Christ becomes as it were the door through which he passed on his way to victory over the spirit-forces, no longer—as for Paul—the weapon with which he overthrew them.

In much the same way, the joyous affirmation that Christ has conquered sin became less and less intelligible with the passage of time; the reality of sin remained in the life even of the believer and had to be reckoned with. It yielded therefore to the death of Christ considered as an atonement for sin. For Paul, to be sure, the atoning efficacy of the Cross extended only to sins committed previously; it was appropriated in baptism, and in the short period that remained before the Parousia, the Christian could be required

to live without sin, at least without any grievous sin. In the new situation the new problem of post-baptismal sin had to be faced. This was dealt with in various ways, by a special offer of a second repentance through a prophet (Hermas), or by the sacrament of penance. But the greatest shift in the teaching of the Church was that which began already with Irenaeus and transferred interest from the Cross to the Incarnation, from the destruction of sin to the divinisation of human nature, leading finally to the express repudiation of the Pauline "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" in favour of the resurrection of the flesh as the central Christian dogma and the supreme Christian hope.

We come now to the application of Werner's principle to the development of *Christology*. Jesus, he would say, regarded himself as destined to emerge from death as the Son of Man and Messiah. In the Primitive Church, he was thought of as an angelic being of the highest order, elect to Messiahship and appearing on earth as a man. He belonged, that is to say, to the divine world but was not to be equated with God. As such, he was consistently addressed as "Lord" and spoken of as "at the right hand of God." The only problem this presented was that of the relation between the angelic glory and the life on earth, nor was this a serious one. For such a being as he possessed the power to transform himself into a man, or God could effect such a change by his miraculous power. The only difference of opinion was as to the point at which this transformation took place. Was it at the resurrection that he passed from the condition in which he was "of the seed of David according to the flesh" to that in which he was "the Son of God with power?" Or was it, as the Christological hymn in Philippians 2 would imply, that he was pre-existent "in the form of God" but came to earth "in the form of a slave?"

The angel-Christology of the Primitive Church was slow in dying, even in the new atmosphere of the post-apostolic period. It lived on vigorously, for example, in the various Gnostic schemes that located Jesus among the emanations and aeons between God and the material world. This of course helped to turn the minds of their opponents in another direction. Again, what was Docetism but a perpetuation of the early Christology on the part of those who no longer understood it? They reduced the human life of Jesus to the mere appearance of a supernatural being, whereas for Paul the supernatural being had entered the world as an actual, not an apparent, man. Again, the Fathers in their exegesis of the Old Testament were concerned to show that the angels who appear in its narratives were after all so many manifestations of the one Christ. Of especial importance in this connection was the LXX of Isaiah 9:6, where the coming deliverer—identified by the Church with Christ—is referred to as "Angel of the great council." But the original Christology was by now so strange as a whole that the Jewish Christians who still clung to it were accused by the Catholic Church of making Jesus "a mere man."

If this is so, the Arian controversy must be seen in a new light. It may be argued that the position of Arius was religiously inadequate, and that Werner would admit. But it is hardly possible to deny that, by the exegetical standards of the time, Arius had the Bible behind him. The pre-existent Wisdom of Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus, and the Wisdom of Solomon was identified by the Church with the Logos and so with the Son. Was he not then a creature, the first-born indeed of the creation, but still a creature? Was not Arianism in every line of the Christological hymn in Philippians 2? Further, the subordination of the Son to the Father is obvious in Paul, and he had been followed in this by the main body of the pre-Nicene Fathers. On the other hand, the partisans of *homoousios* had to admit that this term was unscriptural and an innovation, so that they only accepted it under pressure of controversy. Why then did the *homoousios* prevail? Because in the meantime the Church's soteriology had been radically transformed. For the overthrow of Satan, sin, the law, and death, one who acted with God's authority was sufficient. If, however, man was to be divinised, to be changed from a corruptible to an incorruptible nature, then he must have divine substance.

The term *homoousios* was borrowed from the Gnostics, who were the first to give it theological currency, but the Nicenes gave it a Sabellian twist. It was a fortress into which they withdrew in order to face the two enemies who were advancing at the same time, albeit from different directions. In the same way, the two-natures theory was borrowed from the Gnostics, who had to construct a scheme to show how the heavenly Son could be united with the man Jesus of whom the Gospels told. That some acts were done by his human, others by his divine, nature was their explanation before it was taken over by the Church. But one problem was solved thus only at the price of raising another, that of the unity of the person. The theory of *communicatio idiomatum* was appealed to. But if that were carried far enough to be really useful, the distinction between the natures would disappear again. Apollinarius revived what was once the accepted view, that the Logos united himself at the incarnation with a human body, so making it immortal. But without a human soul, would Christ be truly human? So the Church stumbled on from one position to another, because it had perforce to break with the simple eschatological scheme of the Primitive Church but would not admit it. Instead, it claimed to preserve apostolic tradition, and had therefore to recast that tradition so as to justify what was in fact a grave and inevitable departure from it.

I have dealt so far with two of the major points in the development of dogma. I come now to four instances in which Werner's treatment is much less detailed but no less suggestive. The one that calls for priority of consideration is clearly *eschatology* itself. Here again, it is urged, the starting-point was Paul. For him, as in I Corinthians 15:23-28, there were to be two resurrections. The first would take place at the Parousia, when the

departed saints would rise to share with those still alive in the Messianic reign; the second (for the rest of mankind) would take place at the end of that period. In the post-apostolic age the clear distinction between these two resurrections became less and less tenable. Interest was shifted therefore from cosmic to individual eschatology, from the end of the world to the fate of the soul at death. Problems such as those of the intermediate state now emerged. But by far the most serious problem, and one the Church was never able to solve, was that of how to reconcile the general resurrection at the last day with the claim that only participation in the sacraments could secure immortality and the resurrection of the flesh. How could one and the same thing be at once the privilege of the Christian and the common human destiny?

What next of the *Church*? For Paul, this was the community of the last days, the company of the elect who had died and risen again with Christ in baptism, thus being incorporated into his body, and who would share in his reign at the Return. They were therefore drawn exclusively from what Paul thought of as the last generation of mankind before the Parousia. When the generation to which the first disciples belonged had gone to the grave, the whole conception of the Church needed to be considered afresh. It became the body of Christ in a new sense, as the saving institution in which the sacraments were administered that conferred eternal life, the community of the deified. Further, the original expectation that the saints would rule the world underwent an equally drastic change. It re-emerged in two forms, as the claim of the bishop to exercise authority here and now as the delegate of Christ, and as the promise of a peculiar reward for the martyr and the confessor. These were so many adjustments to a new situation in which the Church needed to maintain a continuing life in the world and yet to justify this by an appeal to the New Testament.

One of the most interesting chapters in Werner's book is that in which he deals with the immense influence of *John* 19:32-35 upon the doctrine of the sacraments. He collects a good deal of evidence in favour of his view that in the post-apostolic Church the sacraments were not attached to the New Testament accounts of their institution, but were regarded as arising out of the death of Christ. He is inclined indeed to think that the conception is older than its appearance in the Fourth Gospel. He shows to what a riot of speculation it led in the course of time, how the Cross came to be identified with the tree of life, and how the Old Testament was ransacked for passages, the allegorical interpretation of which would support the doctrine. Thus, the story of Eve's creation from Adam's rib led easily to an interpretation of the Johannine passage that applied it to the creation, not merely of the sacraments, but of the Church from the wounded side of Jesus. Even the repulsive story of Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19 was pressed into service by over-acute exegetes.

All that has been said so far concerns theology. How was the ethic of the New Testament affected when it came to be interpreted and applied in a

generation that no longer lived by the tremendous Pauline conviction that the power of the old world had once for all been broken and that the powers of the new were active in the Christian? Here again Gnosticism pointed the way to the Church. It did so by developing two tendencies. The first was to asceticism and the second to license. Those who followed the first stressed one half of the Pauline position—the Christian is dead to the world and must mortify the flesh because in Christ he has died to it; those who followed the second stressed the other half—that the Christian is free and under the Spirit as his only guide. Where the Church differed from Gnostic asceticism, as in Marcion for example, is that it exalted celibacy while accepting procreation; it taught the purification and not the destruction of the flesh. Where it differed from antinomianism was that it revived the legal conception of the Christian life, even making of the Christian what Paul had said he was not, a man still under the law.

I close with a few comments on Werner's work as a whole. It is clear, of course, that only one who is as conversant with the material as he is can adequately criticise his thesis in its detailed application. The present writer is certainly not so qualified. But there are two questions the general reader will want to ask the specialist when he examines and reports on the book. The first is: Has the conclusion been reached by the simple process of first selecting the evidence that will establish it? The second is: Did the development of Christian dogma really take as logical a form as is here described? In other words, one suspects that the construction is over precise and neat, that what actually happened was something much more desultory and ragged. We can scarcely doubt that Werner has proved that one factor of major importance in the development of Christian dogma was the need to come to terms with the delay of the Parousia, de-eschatologising as he terms it. But one suspects that this is another case in which the discovery of a hitherto neglected factor leads to the fallacy of regarding this as the only one that needs to be considered. A more complex picture might be more convincing.

There is the further doubt as to the starting-point. Werner is wholly convinced by Schweitzer, not only in his *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, but also in his studies of Paul and, in connection with these, of John and the Primitive Church. Here again one may admit that "consistent eschatology" is of great value, while suspecting that it is too consistent and therefore one-sided. The latest study of Schweitzer to which I have access (Henry Babel; *Que pense Albert Schweitzer?*), while championing him, admits that his conclusions need some modification. The mind of Jesus was not dominated by late-Jewish apocalyptic to the extent that Schweitzer supposes; we must allow equal weight to his religious and ethical teaching. Nor is it certain that the texts on which he bases his argument will take as much weight as he places upon them. Further, we must surely allow that Paul was not always self-consistent, that he did not develop a system but threw out a

series of images. I am not convinced that the Johannine theology is as post-apostolic as Werner contends. There seems to be evidence that the Fourth Gospel represents rather a tradition independent of Paul. Here again we must guard against the fallacy of the single explanation.

But, when all this has been said, the great merit of Werner's book has still to be recognised. He has done what so many theologians refuse to do, taken seriously the extent to which the thinking of the Primitive Church was conditioned by the expectation of the Parousia in the near future. It is significant that a writer like G. R. Beasley-Murray, naturally conservative in his approach, finds the evidence leading him irresistibly to the conclusion that Jesus himself anticipated the speedy end of the world and that even the apocalyptic teaching of *Mark* 13 has been denied to him only on *a priori grounds*.¹ It has become the practice for the historical critic to remit the matter to the systematic theologian to deal with and for the latter to evade the issue by alleging that nothing has really happened, we are still living "between the times." Werner has shown that the hope cherished in the Primitive Church was a matter of substance rather than of dating, and that the passing of the hope required that the Christian message be restated. We are heirs to the labour of the centuries, we know now what was at stake as those who took part in it did not know, and we can pass judgment on their work.

Not that our responsibility ceases at that point. We are called to return behind the dogmatic labour of the centuries to the sources of our faith. We shall not, indeed we cannot, reinstate the hope of the Primitive Church in the twentieth century. But as Christians we believe that in Jesus Christ a deed of God was done, a truth of God was disclosed, that are valid for all time. Can we discover this afresh for ourselves? Can we express it in a language that will make it challengingly relevant for our time? If we can, we shall not merely criticise those who went before us, the makers of the dogmas and the creeds; we shall enter into their inheritance. We may reject the *homoousia* as charged with an idea of salvation that is neither that of the New Testament nor our own. But when we seek in the thought of our day for a category that will be adequate to the Gospel, we shall be doing only what the Nicene Fathers did when they accepted the *homoousia*. A later generation will doubtless judge our categories as inadequate as theirs, but if through them we can discharge our responsibility at once to Christ and to the men and women of today, we need not fear the criticism of the future.

1. See his *Jesus and the Future* (London, 1954), pp. 32, 138, and *passim*.