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The Protestant-Roman Dialogue

A Review Article

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Christianity Divided: Protestant and Roman Catholic Theological Issues.

Edited by D. J. CALLAHAN, H. A. OBERMAN, and D. J. O'HANLON.
New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961, Pp. xiii, 335. \$6.00.

Catholic Theology in Dialogue. By GUSTAVE WEIGEL, S.J. New York:
Harper and Brothers, 1961. Pp. 126. \$2.75.

The Voice of the Church: The Ecumenical Council. By EUGENE R. FAIR-
WEATHER and EDWARD R. HARDY. Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press
(Toronto: Oxford University Press), 1962. Pp. 127. \$3.00.

THE ENTRY of Eastern Orthodox representatives in much fuller numbers into the World Council of Churches and the startling way in which Roman Catholic leaders are encouraging open intercourse with Protestants are two factors that will profoundly and extensively modify the nature of contemporary theological work. Both new hopes and new tensions will be born. In the theological underworld many descendants of Eli will be trembling for the security of the Protestant ark, and the only concern will be whether a writer lines up with the "good guys" or the "bad guys." But the first of the above volumes is issued in the hope that the atmosphere of discussion in America and England is sufficiently healthy to allow a direct plunge into some key theological positions.

The great saving factor is going to be the common agreement that Scripture is the source and controlling norm of all theology. Protestants will have to awaken from their dogmatic biblical slumber, as charitable and thrusting Roman scholars confront them with three facts: (1) Roman scholars are throwing themselves into biblical studies with great zest, and bringing out of the treasury things new and old. They have now a complete liberty in research, to the results of which Protestants will have to listen. Biblical grounding is no longer a Protestant preserve. (2) Roman scholars are going to Scripture as to the deciding voice. The Bible is no longer for them, as it used to be for both sides, a mere magazine in which to find explosive for blasting opponents' views. It is a judge before whom they come to be scrutinized and renewed. (3) Scripture is itself, through Roman studies, challenging entrenched Protestant views. It can no longer be assumed that what is "reformed" is *ipso facto* scriptural. For these three reasons, the dialogue already well under way is full of such exciting promise that we have good motivation for facing with good humour the to-do that cannot fail to be set up in ultra-Protestant dovecotes.

The first two volumes provide fascinating illustration of the three theses just advanced. The first thesis is demonstrated in *Christianity Divided*, in the section on biblical hermeneutics, by D. M. Stanley's essay on "The Gospels as Salvation History." Father Stanley is a former president of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, in which his contribution as a member has been warmly appreciated. He gives a short account of the development of Roman hermeneutics in the modern period and is so grateful for the liberation that came to Roman scholarship through the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* that he twice refers to it as the Magna Charta of biblical studies. He quotes the saying of a former colleague in the Toronto Jesuit Seminary, John L. McKenzie, that in this encyclical Pius XII "unequivocally repudiated fundamentalism in Catholic exegesis." In his own essay Father Stanley uses critical, scientific methods with a thoroughness before which conservative Protestants would flinch. Father Weigel, in his second lecture, "The Scriptures and Theology," gives more of the history of this development in modern Rome and shows the same whole-hearted and unfettered adoption of critical methods. None of the writings in either of these volumes makes it possible to claim more for Protestant than for Roman scholars at this point of critical integrity.

The second thesis centres upon the relation of Scripture and tradition, handled on the Protestant side by Oscar Cullmann and on the Roman by J. R. Geiselman in the opening part of *Christianity Divided*. On this issue there has been an extraordinary drawing-together, which is well represented in Father Weigel's observation: "*Sola Fides, sola scriptura*, are phrases which the Catholic is willing to accept, if they are understood in the light of Catholic principles" (p. 81). As he explains a few pages later, the conditional clause means "provided we understand the phrase [*sola scriptura*] to mean the Scriptures kept alive by the enveloping living tradition" (p. 92). The value of this standpoint is that, even though differences of shading still appear in the formal doctrine of the authority of Scripture, in practice the Bible is acknowledged as the overriding norm to which all must obediently listen.

The third thesis covers the area in which Protestants may hope to receive most stimulation, if they are able to believe with the Puritan divine that "the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of his holy word." Geddes MacGregor's contention in *The Coming Reformation* that Protestants have lost "the reality of the Church" should be kept in mind when these volumes are being read. It is challenging to find Karl Barth asserting in an essay, "The Concept of the Church" (originally an address given to a Roman Catholic audience as long ago as 1927), that on such doctrines as the divine foundation of the Church as an institution, its necessity as the instrument of salvation, its indefectibility, its priority as a body over the individuals that compose it, or its apostolical authority (even as represented in the primacy of the pope) there is no real quarrel. Radical disagreement lies in the Protestant refusal to allow any of the works of grace to be put into the charge of

man. One may ask whether "the reality of the Church" can be preserved if this refusal is not complemented by an obedient willingness to let God bind himself where he has covenanted to bind himself.

Father Weigel's contribution, which appears in both volumes (most of the contributions in *Christianity Divided* have appeared elsewhere) agrees that there are concerns common to Protestant and Roman ecclesiology, which "as a formal theological discipline was born in the sixteenth century as a direct result of the Protestant Reformation" (*Catholic Theology in Dialogue*, p. 11). Rejuvenation has come to the subject, he says, by a return to scriptural foundations, and particularly to the teaching of the New Testament on the Church as the Body of Christ. He takes up the fear among Protestants, expressed by Paul Tillich, that on this basis "Catholics put the historical Church in the place of God" (p. 24)—the very criticism that we have just quoted from Barth. Readers may judge for themselves how the matter stands.

A most interesting example of the third thesis is the work of Hans Küng, described as "a young Swiss Catholic theologian" and represented in *Christianity Divided* by a paper on "Justification and Sanctification According to the New Testament." Here for the time being the Council of Trent is set aside and Küng makes a distinction between justification and sanctification. The former, he says, has a legal character and the latter is linked to divine worship. From this fresh start he writes an article that should rejoice the heart of the most conservative Protestant.

The introduction to this section describes a piece of Küng's work that is even more provocative, an untranslated book on justification with the subtitle, *The Teaching of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*. In this book Küng maintains that there is no difference between Trent and Karl Barth. Before publication, Barth wrote "a cordial letter," now printed with the book, in which he "assured the reader that Küng had faithfully reproduced both what he said and what he meant" (p. 308). Barth was withholding judgment upon the issue only until it could become apparent that other Roman scholars agreed with Küng's representation of Roman teaching. This agreement, for which the evidence is given, has now been demonstrated. The astonishing conclusion must be drawn that one of the most contentious issues between the Roman and Protestant worlds has now been solved by direct theological enquiry. The essay now printed is offered in the same spirit as a demonstration that "the most fruitful way for Catholic and Protestant theologians to meet is through joint study of the inspired Word of God."

As if all this were not enough, we have for good measure a contribution from Professor Torrance on justification in which he displays the foundations in Knox and Calvin that render impossible the later scholastic dismemberment of justification and sanctification into a temporal order of salvation. The sanctification of human nature is already objectively begun in the Incarnation. A heartening feature of this article is the beautiful incarnational understanding that Torrance displays in Knox and the Scots Confession.

The present theological situation has the refreshing feature that the "Catholic" challenge is being brought to us by Reformed biblical scholars. One such is Max Thurian, the Presbyterian monk of the Community of Taizé, who contributes to *Christianity Divided* a short piece, "Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of Transubstantiation," and a longer one on "The Real Presence." In the former he rightly treats transubstantiation as not an essential dogma of Catholic theology, but as an attempt by means of the questionable metaphysics of a past period to safeguard the mystery of the Real Presence. In the latter he gives in the main an exposition and criticism of Calvin's efforts to do the same thing in a more theological way. He concludes by formulating eight valuable theses of his own. It is a misfortune that the book does not contain either here or elsewhere a contribution on the question (which will increasingly become a burning one) in what way, if at all, Reformed theology must accommodate itself to the view that in the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ is sacramentally presented to the Father. For it may seriously be argued that a doctrine of the Real Presence is pointless unless it be the presence of Christ as priest and *offered*—not merely *received*—victim.

Strangely enough, Father Weigel does not take up this issue either, although he must be well aware that the Roman Mass is a great stumbling-block to the general Protestant reader. Perhaps he feels that we must begin much further back before there can be any meaningful dialogue on this matter. If this is his opinion, he is surely in the right, for in few things is Protestantism so enfeebled as in its understanding of the sacraments. For many Protestants, he says, faith is "a quasi-mystical experience. It is occasioned by the hearing of the word of salvation but not caused by it" (p. 54). Of course he knows that there are Protestants who think differently—what is "Protestantism" anyway in our confused modern situation?—and who would agree with his observation, "On this side of the eschatological divide man has no right to expect an I-Thou conversation with God" (p. 52). Unfortunately, however, the idea of I-Thou confrontation without historical, creaturely, physical mediation might almost be said to be a standing principle of modern Protestants, who are being encouraged in their pseudo-spirituality by theologians who ought to know better. It is mostly through this error that Protestants have lost "the reality of the Church." Father Weigel is probably right, therefore, in his chapter on "Sacrament and Symbol" in taking up issues at the basic level of the impossibility of revelation or redemption without *signs*. "Symbolism is the key to good theology" (p. 66).

Profoundly biblical teaching in this and other areas is offered in *Christianity Divided* by E. H. Schillebeeckx, a Belgian Dominican, in his contribution on "The Sacraments: An Encounter with God." The very title speaks volumes. It sounds very Protestant, but is far from the Protestant delusion just named, and yet it will appeal to Protestants because "Our aim in this present work is to throw some light on the essential sacramental

character of the Church from the standpoint of *intersubjectivity* or *existential personal encounter*." The present reviewer has found himself compelled to construct his whole theology on principles which he here finds succinctly expressed in a short paragraph:

Precisely because the supernatural saving reality, veiled in historical events, and surrounded by the darkness of mystery, is present to us only in earthly form (*sacramentum*), it demands the revealing word (*verbum*) as the interior aspect of its earthly appearance. Only in and through the prophetic word is the divine dimension of saving history brought to light. "Word" and "sacrament" are therefore the fundamental constituents for revelation in the Old Testament as well as in the New and, after this revelation has been brought to an end, for the life of the Church which grows out of it.

If one were to begin to call attention to the riches of this chapter, one would never get beyond it. Here is biblical, Trinitarian, Christological, ecclesiastical, liturgical understanding of a sublime order.

Not much is said about preaching in these books, but what is said is good. Save for passing references, the only real treatment of the subject is by the Reformed scholar, Heiko A. Oberman, in "Reformation, Preaching, and *Ex Opere Operato*." This meagreness is unfortunate, because Roman theologians are beginning to see the force of what Oberman calls the real discovery or rediscovery about preaching at the Reformation, which was that it is not just "instruction" but an *apocalyptic*, revelatory event. Two other excellent points that he makes are that preaching is a corporate act—against Gregory Dix's misunderstanding of the matter—and that the emphasis upon preaching was the Reformed way of insisting that Scripture has to be understood *within the Church*. He relates this valuable insight to the Scripture-Tradition issue. His remarks upon *opus operatum* are helpful because he finds this principle strongly affirmed in the Reformers' understanding of preaching. The power of the Word resides not in the preacher but in God; yet the divine Word cannot be divorced from the preacher. Protestants nowadays, one might add, are all too prone to see only the first half of this truth, especially in reference to the sacraments. This is their pseudo-spirituality once more. Informed Roman Catholics are willing to admit that in order to withstand the Protestant error of thinking that the grace of the sacraments depends upon faith (instead of faith upon the grace) they have made formulations that could and did descend into a wrongly "automatic" and even "magical" notion of grace. One wishes that Oberman had come right out and maintained that *ex opere operato* is a formula for insisting upon the sole causality and sovereignty of personal divine grace. Since this is what Roman theologians now see to be the real force of the formula, it is uncharitable folly to attempt to use it any more as a bludgeon against them.

A few remarks should be added about other parts of Father Weigel's book. Oddly enough, "Revelation, Dogma, and Theology" has a markedly subjective emphasis. That the Protestant tendency to make much of the Holy Spirit and faith should reappear here is a sign of the times. There is a reassuring chapter on "Church-State Relations," a useful description of

Roman-Orthodox sympathies and tensions, and an account of "Ecumenism and the Roman Catholic Church."

The third book on our list has not been mentioned so far because it is not direct dialogue with Rome, although it speaks into the situation. It is designed for an Anglican audience, but its value is ecumenical. Its purpose is to put the coming Vatican Council into proper relation to church councils in general.

The word *council* lives a protean life. One Canadian denomination calls its supreme governing body a General Council. Another calls an important executive committee its Administrative Council. The World Council is not an ecumenical council in the ancient sense, for the ecumenical councils were not meetings of denominations but of bishops and others. The Canadian Council is only a committee of representatives with some executive powers. The Vatican Council is not to us an ecumenical council, though one of its purposes in the eyes of some participants may be to prevent the Roman Church itself from becoming still more the prisoner of the Vatican. There is no dictionary of terms laid up in heaven—or even in the Bible—defining for us how words shall be used. *The Voice of the Church* is concerned with the function and history of church councils in the traditional sense. The second part, on the history, is by E. R. Hardy of Berkeley Divinity School. It takes us from the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) through the ecumenical councils to regional and national councils of Reformation times and on to the Vatican Council of 1868–70. Here one may learn of the large and indispensable, though not always reputable, part councils have played in the life of the Church. It is a valuable compendium of their purposes, findings, and results.

The first part of the volume, "The Meaning of Ecumenical Councils," is written by the learned editor of this *Journal*, and offers a defence and delimitation of councils as dogmatic authorities in matters of faith, worship, and life. We are given a lucid exposition of the reasons why the biblical revelation calls for dogmatic and, indeed, inspired propositional formulations. The laymen for whom the book is written will admit, one trusts, that lucidity does not always exonerate either writer or reader from exactingness. The more knowledgeable will realize that the author is contending at times with modern theologians who in their rejection of verbal inspiration or for other reasons have erroneously rejected dogmatic religion also. Keeping in view the fragmentariness of all human formulations, the author insists nevertheless upon their divine sanction and necessity, and faces squarely the twin questions of the kind of authority that the deliverances of the Church ought to be credited with and how the truth they enshrine is to be honoured and furthered in further formulations. Yet it has never been the function of councils to elaborate whole theologies.

Provisionally, the Church as a whole has exercised due self-restraint in her dogmatic statements. As the story of the generally accepted ecumenical councils makes plain, definitions of dogma have traditionally been envisaged as an extraordinary means of dealing with doctrinal crises in the Church, rather than as an ordinary means of theological progress (p. 39).

Fortunately, the author gives much space to discussing the relation of the popes to councils. Like Barth, he has no "quarrel with the idea of a primacy of honour and precedence, or even of jurisdiction, exercised by the occupant of the Roman see" (pp. 50f.). The point at issue is "the concept of papal sovereignty and infallibility." "What we do question, and must oppose until we are shown good reason to the contrary, is the expansion of the Roman primacy into a monarchy claiming sovereign authority and extending its claim even to matters of faith" (p. 51). "It seems clear enough that the papal theory of doctrinal authority is really alien to the basic episcopal constitution of the Church" (p. 59). Referring to the Immaculate Conception and the Bodily Assumption of the Virgin, he says: "Whereas the ancient creeds explicate and elucidate a witness whose outlines can be traced in the New Testament itself, the modern definitions appear to be real innovations, without adequate basis in the apostolic tradition" (p. 55). Our hope that the gulf between Rome and Anglicans (and others) has not been made wide beyond all crossing may rest on the fact that Roman Catholicism and papalism are not simply identical, and in the fact that the unity of the Church lies in the hands of God, not only in the hands of men. Some doors have been opened that the forthcoming Vatican Council may open still wider (pp. 71f.).

Professor Fairweather's analysis of the genesis and authority of dogma can be instructively compared with the contribution on hermeneutics made in *Christianity Divided* by A. A. Van Ruler, a minister of the Reformed Church in Holland, who is presented to readers as providing a mediating view between the neo-orthodox theologians, who emphasize the *givenness* of revelation in history, and existential theologians, whose concern is more with the *adaptive* character of the kerygma and its *appropriation* in successive ages (p. 77). Van Ruler argues for the evolutionary character of dogma at the price of severing the Holy Spirit from Christ more than is usually done ("... the outpouring of the Holy Spirit must be understood as a truly new manifestation and a truly new act of God when compared with the Incarnation"), and by regarding dogma as not being in the message of salvation but as crystallizing in response to it (pp. 97, 99). The consequences of such a view are sketched very fully without apparent alarm by the writer. The heart of them is expressed in two questions to which he expects an affirmative answer: "Is not what we do with this revelation and the form which Christ takes in us more important than the revelation itself? It not man of the most central importance in the final analysis?" (p. 100). The view of Professor Fairweather must surely stand as the proper corrective to such aberrations, for he finds the dogmatic character of the Gospel in the event of salvation itself, and specifically in the testimony of the apostles. The strongest way of stating the case is by reference to the prophetic office of Christ, whose self-testimony is an articulation in speech of the divine event that he himself is. The Word of the Gospel is the Word which is his Person.

It should be clear from even this short survey that issues are now being

raised that come close to home for all of us. These three books provide an excellent introduction to the now inescapable conversation with Rome. *The Voice of the Church* is good preparation for the Vatican Council. Father Weigel's book opens up a whole series of timely and inviting topics. *Christianity Divided* is a theological feast for all who desire to learn, and it provides extensive bibliographies for those who would like to go further.