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THREE NOVELISTS AND THE QUESTION OF GOD

by S. H. RAE

THIS is a shortened version of a paper read to the Dunedin branch of the Theological Students' Fellowship (related to the New Zealand I.V.F.). Mr. Rae is now a minister in the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand.

A CENTRAL concern of contemporary Christian theology is to evoke in modern secularized man a realization of the possibility of the existence of God, and this concern has prompted many and varied approaches to Christian apologetic, from the seemingly tireless repetition of the outworn dogmas of an earlier era to the cold rationalistic abstractions of the Secular Theology of the so-called God-is-dead School.

The "Question of God" has been carefully outlined in Gerhard Ebeling's essays, *Reflections on Speaking Responsibly of God*,¹ not as a logical, or even as a theological, proposition, not as some merely intellectual query which may either be affirmed or denied and then dropped from discussion, but rather as a radical questioning of the whole basis of man's existence. The Question of God is not a matter of Prime Mover, First Cause, Necessary Being or Ultimate Value, for these propositions all belong to the realm of natural and not of radical questioning. The Question of God is incapable of coming as an objective question for it does not call into question some objective fact isolated from the observer, as in a scientific or logical investigation, but rather exposes a radical questioning of the very integrity of the questioner himself.* Questions of Ultimate Meaning, of man's strange awareness of guilt and judgment, and of the breakdown in essential communication between man and man, and between man and Ultimate Reality are part and parcel of the intellectual ferment of the present day, and are sharply reflected in the arts. It is from just this awareness of his finite, limited humanity that man is first probed by the

¹ In *Auftrag der Kirche in der Welt* (Zurich/Stuttgart, 1959), pp. 19-40, the *Festschrift* for Emil Brunner's 70th birthday; E.T., Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (London, 1963), pp. 333-353.

² Cf. S. H. Rae, "The Place of the Theistic Proofs in Contemporary Reformed Theology", *Charisma*, Auckland, N.Z., No. 2, Nov. 1965, pp. 10-12.

Question of God; by the question of the possibility of Infinitude, of Divinity, of the existence of the God of Christian proclamation.

Ebeling goes on, as a theologian, to speak of the Word—event of faith in which God's word calls finite man to Himself—into the radical questioning God Himself has intervened, and in His saving Word restored fellowship with man. However I wish to avoid the discussion of the Word as Reply to the Question of God, and in what follows to explore only one aspect of Ebeling's discussion; that is how this radical questioning may be induced in modern man with all his boasted self-sufficiency. The scientific attitude to reality is to "bracket" the question of God. This is a technical term taken from Husserl, the European phenomenologist, which means in effect to set the question aside without either affirming it or denying it, or pronouncing it meaningless, and to proceed without taking it into account. Thus for example the biologist, even the Christian biologist, approaches his subject on its own terms without raising the Question of God as a biological problem. Modern western secularism is dedicated, on a lower level of intellectual sophistication, to ignoring the Question in the same way. Bourgeois existence is in its essence superficial, escapist and unreal, a constant fleeing from the very questions of meaning, finitude, guilt, mortality, and communication which, if taken seriously, could raise the Question of God.

That is, the Question of God must be brought to expression³ as a real and vital possibility. Modern man must be forced to face his situation and to ask the radical questions, despite his dedication to avoiding them. I have chosen the "three novelists" not quite at random, but because each one, in his own way, has much to contribute to this very process. Others might well be added, but I have chosen three men who illustrate three different responses to the Question, who all three represent the 'modern' outlook on life and who are all dead, thus enabling a more tentative criticism of their work.

I. CAMUS

Albert Camus, who was born in 1913 in French North Africa of an Alsatian-Majorcan background, falls (despite his own protestations to the contrary) within the general group of existentialist writers, the general drift of whose thought is by now well known. Having lost his father during the War he was brought up in Algiers by his mother and grandmother, and the basic emotional deprivation of a fatherless home was deeply to affect his later thought, for nowhere does he depict a meaningful father-son relationship, and

³ Ebeling: "zu Sprache bringen".

may go a long way towards explaining why so much "God-the-Father" theology remained incomprehensible to him. Illness thwarted his academic career. After taking his *licence*, the equivalent of a general arts degree, and presenting a *diplôme* thesis on the influence of Plotinus upon St. Augustine, his way was barred; the *agrégation*, the competitive examination for teachers, required a medical clearance, and Camus had tuberculosis. He turned to journalism and soccer. The latter is important as 'sportsmanship' and 'team spirit' became important values for him once he rejected the possibility of Ultimate Values. Politically he was pro-Arab in the Algerian question, and a communist until communist ruthlessness in North Africa and Hungary offended his humane spirit and he left the fold. He was rejected for military service during the Second World War and occupied himself with Resistance journalism. In his later years he embraced a "politics of compassion" strikingly akin to that of Tarron in *The Plague*. After one false start he happily married, but was long separated from his wife during the War. Again this was a fundamental psychological experience, reflected in his themes of 'exile' and 'isolation'.⁴ Camus was tragically killed in a motor accident in January, 1960, at a period when he appeared to be entering a new phase in his writing.

It is important to note that the early works with which Camus made his name, are not always typical of the mature writer. Early idealization of *la vie méditerranéenne* in a sundrenched Algerian utopia soon crashed, and the 'absurdity' portrayed in early writings flows as much from the unreality of the romantic ideal as from an increasing penetration of the human condition. Happy marriage in 1940, the struggle of the *Maquis* during the War and participation in the Algerian struggle produced an *engagé* writer who had passed beyond being a mere prophet of the absurd; yet it is this image of him which persists in the popular assessment of his work.

The first sign of this creative period was perhaps his *Lettres à un ami allemand*⁵ of 1943-4. Although unable to profess any absolute values he produced a new humanism in which "some actions are finer than others". In a world in which there was no possibility of God his imaginary German friend advocated complete personal sacrifice to the Nation, through whose destiny the individual would find release, meaning and salvation. Camus countered that,

⁴ Both Rambert and Dr. Rieux in *The Plague* are separated, and separation is the theme of the collection *Exile and the Kingdom*.

⁵ Librairie Gallimard, Paris, 1945.

though he might not yet know Truth and Good in the absolute, Nazi lies and evil demonstrated that some things were morally better or worse than others.

Of his novels *The Plague*⁶ is the best known and the most simply unravelled. It is simple in address with a meaning obvious to even the casual reader and with a winning appeal to his basic humanity. Bubonic plague, the Black Death of history, strikes Oran in Algeria in the 1940's. As always the rats die first, then when the fleas desert their dead hosts men die, in increasing numbers. Finally the pneumonic form with its internal symptoms appears, and then the plague wanes and disappears as mysteriously as it came. Within the setting of strict isolation Camus portrays various individuals, showing different philosophies of life brought up against ultimate reality in the horror of death and uncertainty. Dr. Rieux, the narrator, seeks men's health, not their salvation, and with no ideals above devotion to duty battles relentlessly on, seeming to gain nothing. He is *engagé*—in a hopeless situation. At the other extreme is Father Paneloux, Jesuit scholar, who portrays the man of faith faced by the same situation. His first great sermon during the plague is a tirade of Old Testament proportions against the sin of Oran, for which God has sent the pestilence as a great flail, which in Camus's vivid style one can almost hear swishing overhead. Later, having watched the magistrate's son die in a terrible agony, he preaches again; not now from the theory but from the anguish of his own heart. He fully acknowledges the scandal of innocent suffering but will not deny God, and if he accepts God he must accept everything else, even this scandal. Taken by a malady which is not quite identified as plague he himself dies, refusing to call medical aid and fully submissive to the will of God. He thus represents a form of Christian existentialism. He represents the life of faith into which Camus, with the best will in the world, simply could not enter. To him the scandal remained incomprehensible. Cottard is anxious because the police are investigating him and gains relief during the plague as others are too anxious to bother him, and when the plague dies he goes mad. Grand is a clerk who finds his destiny in keeping the plague statistics and in his spare time trying to write the perfect novel, which never gets beyond the first sentence; a frighteningly acute analysis of the utter meaninglessness of so many modern lives. Rambert is a journalist who can think of nothing but escaping to his mistress in France to dedicate himself to romantic love until, given the chance, he freely elects to stay and help fight the plague.

⁶ *La Peste* (Paris, 1947). Citations from Penguin English edition, 1960/64.

Tarrou, an ex-communist, sees in the plague the symbol of a greater plague. "We are all under the plague", the mysterious evil which drives man, even socialist man with his high humanistic ideals, to inhuman brutality. He seeks now to become a non-Christian saint, a conception which Rieux cannot understand:

I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace. And today I am still trying to find it; still trying to understand all those others and not be the mortal enemy of anyone. I only know that one must do what one can to cease being plague-stricken, and that's the only way in which we can hope for some peace or, failing that, a decent death . . .

Each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth, is free from it.⁷

In the face of this universal evil all one can do is to take the victim's side and so reduce the damage done. Peace can only be attained by the way of sympathy; "Can I be a saint without God? That is the problem I'm up against today."⁸ But Dr. Rieux has no use for sainthood:

Perhaps . . . But, you know, I feel more fellowship with the defeated than with saints. Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me, I imagine. What interests me is being a man.⁹

This mutual confession is followed by a swim, a ritual cleansing; the humanist who wants to be a man, and the secular saint are united in a deep and new fellowship.

Although, at one level, *The Plague* represents the War and the Occupation, and men's reactions to them, we know from Camus's notes that it also represents "existence in general". It is clear from Tarrou's confession that the plague represents the mystery of human evil and barbarity. It is not "original sin", for, typically, Camus portrays it as something external, a disease which, like Plague, attacks him from outside himself. The three radical questions are thus raised and answered. Ultimate meaning; "to be a man", "to go on doing my duty", "to fight on the side of the oppressed and so minimize the damage", or "to acknowledge God in the midst of despair". Paneloux in acceptance, and Tarrou and Rieux in rejection, raise the Question of God clearly and sharply. The Problem of Guilt is itself symbolized, in the mysterious plague which, Rieux knows, will come again. The Problem of Isolation is symbolized in the isolation of Oran from the rest of the world, of Rieux from his wife and Rambert from his lover, of Rieux and Tarrou from each other, an isolation which is healed by confession

⁷ Pp. 206-207.

⁸ P. 208.

⁹ P. 209.

and cleansing, and of Rieux from Paneloux, an isolation which never transcends an agreement to differ.

Though Camus's answer is given clearly in the negative, the Question of God is openly and sharply presented to the reader in terms which impel radical self-examination. Indeed the Question of God was always an open question in his own mind. In a lecture to the Dominican fathers of Latour-Maubourg in 1948 he strongly dissociated himself from contemporary French atheism; having faced the question squarely he could not believe, and it was the depth and sincerity of his inner conflict which produced this moving work.

II. KAFKA

Franz Kafka was born in Prague in 1883, a son of a rich Jewish merchant. After reading medicine and literature for a time he turned to law, taking his doctorate from the University of Prague, and worked in an office to allow more time for his writing than would be possible in the practice of his profession. In later years he lived in Berlin. Twice he felt unable to marry the girl he loved; on the second occasion because he was condemned to an early death by his tuberculosis. In fact his inflexible mental honesty, coupled to an inhuman sensitivity, proved too much for his frail body and he died during the hunger years in post-war Berlin at the age of forty. His published *Diaries*¹⁰ show something of the tortured inner-world in which he lived, tormented by fear, isolation, guilt, frustration and the sense of being an outcast. Three works may be selected to illustrate the three radical questions discussed above.

*The Castle*¹¹ is a tale with the horrible simplicity of Kafka who portrays a world tottering on the brink of making sense, in which a land surveyor, K, arrives in a village to undertake work for the authorities who inhabit a castle which, set on a hill, dominates the whole community. K, like his name, is enigmatic and incomplete and his attempts to secure the promised work represent the quest for an ultimate meaning and purpose in his life, a destiny which will give him both identity and purpose in living. But the Castle will not answer. The work, and the coherent right to live in the village, are not forthcoming. No contact can be made. The Castle remains arbitrary, elusive and essentially incomprehensible. There is no validation from above. The novel was incomplete when Kafka

¹⁰ Max Brod, ed., *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1910-23* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1964).

¹¹ *Das Schloss* (Munich, 1926) (posthumous); E.T., Penguin books, 1957/63.

died, and was published as it stood, but we know from his notes that K was to die worn out by his struggle. To his deathbed word was to come that, though his legal claim to the appointment was rejected he might, because of other circumstances, live in the village and find some other work to do. K represents modern technical man. He is "accustomed to measure and classify, to define boundaries and settle disputes". Technically competent he is perpetually in a state of exile, a spiritually displaced person. God is incomprehensible in a world where everything is natural, historical or otherwise explicable and yet man is constantly uneasy in the face of the great question set over his own destiny.

In *The Trial*¹² Kafka depicts the anguish of a man, aware of his guilt and under judgment, who strives this way and that and can do nothing to make contact with his judge or to influence his case in any way. He is merely woken one morning, told he is under arrest but may continue to live a normal life, and must present himself when summoned. His crime, and the identity of his judge are alike secret, barristers have no way of influencing the hearing, and all his endeavours lead him around in circles. Having reached the very depth of despair he is dragged off by night and done to death in a disused quarry, having been found guilty. Aware of judgment for unknown offences, and unable even to plead for mercy from his inscrutable judge, Kafka's man goes down to death alone and lost. In both these works the Question of God is clearly raised in the radical questioning of man's being, and is not rejected. For Kafka, God, or the mysterious Authority-figure, is wholly aloof, unknown and unknowable. Man for his part is lost, cut off and rejected.

The short story, *The Great Wall of China*,¹³ is concerned with this unreality and separation between man and God. During the building of the Wall a Chinese sage contemplates the Emperor from the vast open loneliness of South China, and finds that Peking and the Emperor are so far away that life can well be lived without reference to them. Loyalty remains but it is meaningless. Spiritual exile is complete, as the parable of the messenger illustrates;¹⁴ God cannot address man and man cannot address God. The Question of God is clearly raised, but God will not, or cannot, answer.

¹² *Der Prozess* (Munich, 1925) (posthumous).

¹³ "Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer", E.T. in Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (Penguin, 1961/64), to which reference is made.

¹⁴ Pp. 76-77.

III. DOSTOIEVSKY

Feodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born in 1821 in Moscow, the son of a doctor and grandson of a priest. The family appears to have been deeply religious and the children were early introduced to historical, literary and spiritual writings of both Russian and foreign authors. Dostoevsky graduated as an army engineer but resigned his commission three years later to devote his time to literary activities. After early recognition as a novelist he was arrested in 1849 for being associated with the printing and propagation of revolutionary material. The trial, condemnation and the amazing experience of the prisoners' reprieve at the very stakes made a deep impression upon him, the Dostoevsky thereafter looked upon his experience on the Semenovskiy Square as a "resurrection". For the city-reared Dostoevsky imprisonment in Siberia and later service in a penal battalion of the Siberian army led to a deep and lasting insight into the lot of the poor and downtrodden elements of the Empire. An obscure nervous disease had by this time developed into violent epilepsy and in 1859 he was discharged from the army as unfit, but with his commission and civil rights restored. He had also married, but lost his wife, and the brother Mikhail who had stood by him in his imprisonment and who believed passionately in his brother's great gift and calling as a novelist, soon afterwards. His black despair was relieved only by the pressure of work which, after his taking upon himself his brother's family and debts, occupied all his energies. For years he worked at heart-breaking speed, living in cruel poverty and even forced to visit Europe to avoid his creditors. A second marriage brought some tenderness into his last years, and growing recognition reduced the financial pressure under which he lived. His death in 1881 brought hitherto unprecedented demonstrations of love and honour from the populace of St. Petersburg. Although Soviet literary criticism has steadfastly ignored his profound Christian insights, Dostoevsky remains one of the most widely read Russian novelists, so far as it is possible to judge. His gift was the deep insight into the human situation which seems to arise only out of great suffering.

Unlike Camus and Kafka, Dostoevsky is a Christian, but a deeply disturbed one. Although a conservative in his later years, he retained a deep distrust of a Christianity which had become part of a corrupt and decaying social order, and looked to the Orthodox tradition of mysticism and sanctity for the revival of essential Christian witness. Had he written theological or moral treatises his

thought would no doubt have perished with him, or with the social order to which he belonged, but because it comes to life in the life-situations of the characters he created, it not only survives but continues to raise in a vital and compelling manner the Question of God which engaged his own questing intellect. His theme is the resurrection-life which grows out of the very depth of human woe. His own response to the Question of God was a positive affirmation; "I do not believe in Christ and His confession as a child, but my hosanna has come through a great purging fire of doubt." There is no conscious pietism, no attempt to separate between the just and the unjust among his characters. The reader simply encounters men and women finding new life as they respond to the Question of God which faces them out of their deepest woe.

The plots of his three major novels will be well known and need little elaboration here. In *Crime and Punishment* the Question of God is raised for Rodian Romanovich Raskolnikov by his own experience of the futility of his delusions of moral infallibility, and by the 'resurrection-living' of the young prostitute, Sonia, who has sold herself to maintain the family of her constantly drunk father. Raskolnikov, a depressed student who believes that, since there is no God, man must be the seat of all moral authority has his whole world-view shattered by the events which lead up to, and follow, his murder of the old woman pawn-broker. It seems that he is after all possessed of a conscience, that there is some objective moral evil in what he had done, and his soul is healed by the young girl who, in a most moving scene, reads to him the Johanne account of the raising of Lazarus. This is not an orthodox religious novel, but neither is it not to be taken at its face value and dismissed as the work of a troubled mind. It is much more than either of these alternatives for, in his frighteningly powerful account of Raskolnikov's conversion, he has brought to expression the Question of God in a concrete life-situation. He has not expounded the whole gospel, for he was an artist rather than a preacher, but he has exposed and undermined the rationalism of Raskolnikov with nothing less than the self-giving love of a young girl, insulted and shamed, a social outcast, who in her self-giving addressed to him the healing Word of God.

Again *The Brothers Karamazov* raises the Question of God by introducing the mystery of the 'resurrection-living' of the younger brother, Alyosha. Into the half-mad world of the Karamazovs, the lecherous father, the atheist brother Ivan, the obedient but half-silly servant Smerdyakov and the unjustly condemned sensuous brother Mitya, Alyosha returns, having left his monastery to live in the

world. He has declined to 'save his own soul' by monastic seclusion and has been sent by his elder, Father Zossima, back into the sensuous bedlam of his own home to see "whether a Karamazov can hope". The novel portrays him as a reconciler, a healer, one who breathes a quiet faith and a holy peace into the circles in which he moves. His sanctity arises from his passionate involvement in the world, not from a safe seclusion from it. For some philosophers it is the 'problem of evil' which militates against Christian belief, and this has already been seen in Camus's reaction to innocent suffering. For Dostoevsky it is the 'problem of the good' which demands explanation. If there is no God where does the 'resurrection-living' of the Sonias and Alyoshas of this world come from? Thus is raised the Question of God in a vital and compelling form.

In *The Idiot* Prince Myshkin is an epileptic, like Dostoevsky himself, and is simple and good, with the simple goodness of a child, and is the butt of everyone's humour and scorn. Yet he too, in a quite devastating manner, raises the whole Question; can the idiot whom all despise have the key to life which the wise and powerful lack? He too is a healer, and Dostoevsky's *Diaries* reveal that he is a figure of Christ, who was despised and rejected by men, who reconciled, and loved children, and was wise, but not with the wisdom of this age. Here the Question of God is raised in its starkest form.

These novels are not religious in the conventional sense. They do not preach, rather they shatter their readers into an awareness of the divine goodness in those who have become 'friends of the bridegroom', the children of the Kingdom. Dostoevsky raises the Question of God, and gives a clear affirmative answer, by portraying the forgiveness of God brooding over his men and women in the starkness of their life-situations. It is through the lives of his 'saints' that this new life is mediated to them. All this is, at first encounter, deeply confusing to those brought up in the Western Protestant tradition, for Dostoevsky is both Russian and Orthodox to the core. Yet, though he does not overtly preach the cross and saving atonement, his novels have an unmistakable evangelical intent. Their impact in the west has been immense and lasting, and the western Evangelical should be prepared to enter into the real struggle which is necessary before they yield their meaning.

What does all this signify? I have suggested at the outset that modern man refuses to reckon with the existence of God simply because he is able to set aside and ignore the radical questions

posed by life. It is only as his own arrogance and sense of self-sufficiency are undermined that he is prompted to seek some new ground for his existence. Modern literature vividly illustrates the situation in which man has found himself, in a world where persons and things are confused and meaningless, and in which man himself has lost his meaning, and life is a dream-like creeping death; the world-view of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, or Ingmar Bergman's film *The Silence*. Secular man has been described by Father Charles Moeller, a European priest and literary critic: "nibbled away by death, ceaselessly causing suffering and doing evil, he lays upon his own shoulders all the burden of history, all the incoherence of the relationship between himself and his fellow men".¹⁵

It is the task of Christian preaching to make man face the radical questions, and to help him to resolve them in a positive direction. But preaching alone is often not enough. Before man is ready for God's Word of address he must realize his own finitude, face up to his own corruption and infidelity, acknowledge the meaninglessness of his empty existence, and entertain the possibility of a deeper meaning, a new basis for living. The gospel for secular man is the gospel of Christ, as it has always been, and the resolution of the contemporary crisis in western Christianity cannot lie in the direction suggested by Secular Theology, that is in a removal of all that scandalizes modern man in the preaching of the Church. Rather the gospel must be vigorously preached, with all its seeming scandal, but in the context of the fears and concerns of secular man. Not a secularized gospel, but a gospel addressed to secularized man, a gospel which will begin by undermining man's self-sufficiency, and prompting in him the radical questioning which may prepare him for the Word of Life.

I believe that for a substantial group within our highly literate society, and particularly for that group of our young people who are actively involved in the study of modern literature, or who are generally caught up in the intellectual questionings which are part and parcel of all student life, this radical questioning and self-realization may be communicated as the Question of God is raised by the modern novelist, dramatist or even the modern filmmaker. All these avenues of communication are part and parcel of the life of the present generation of 'young intellectuals' and if those who are concerned with the preaching of the Gospel within

¹⁵ Charles Moeller, "The Image of Man in Modern Literature (1)", in *Frontier*, London, Autumn 1965, p. 180.

this area of life can capitalize, openly and honestly, on the questions so raised they may find the way opened for a more direct communication of the Christian gospel. To try to evoke this critical self-evaluation by academic theological arguments, which are often meaningless to those who have not already embraced the faith, is to invite failure. The contribution of the three novelists discussed and of many others, of whom William Golding among English writers and Samuel Beckett among living dramatists need only be noted, is that the radical questions, and hence the Question of God itself, are presented in life-situations, with all the compelling power of great literary ability. The Christian evangelist who is himself at home in this intellectual milieu, and is able to address the Gospel, in its integrity, to those who are already prepared to discuss the searching questions of life, may find himself particularly well fitted for the difficult, but essential, ministry to the present generation of 'young intellectuals'.

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