

KING'S THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

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BOOK REVIEWS

BECOMING AND BEING: THE DOCTRINE OF GOD IN CHARLES HARTSHORNE AND KARL BARTH

By C.E.Gunton. O.U.P..1978. ppX+236. £10.

For anyone who is depressed by the present state of philosophical theology this book may act as a lifesaver. Instead of offering resounding platitudes for answers to questions (such as 'briefly, what do you think of the universe?') Dr Gunton takes the reader to the heart of all problems, as the title itself indicates. Fortunately we have at least one down-to-earth empirical stance in what is necessarily a highly abstract and technical discussion: we also seem to 'exist', both in the sense of continual change and in that of (some) abiding entity or even identity. Yet we are not God. However, we *talk* of and about God, or, if Marxist, against God. The fact that we have and use words, and that in a thousand different ways, not only enables us to transcend our immediate environment but also to postulate necessary existence. But as soon as we become conscious of this linguistic achievement a host of contradictory perspectives opens up. Is the polarity of Becoming and Being a contradiction? If so, can it be resolved in God talk? And if satisfactory clues can be taken up do they, in a sort of cluster, argue for, or against, the existence of the God of the Christian faith? Hartshorne (American, still alive, known as a guest lecturer to some students at King's) and Barth (d.1968, lectured at King's in the thirties), though in many respects diametrically opposed, serve, under the author's aegis, as explorers and guides in this old maze of right and false spors and exits.

Yet this is not a replay of the old game. Not only is the vocabulary of a kind which the ancient authors would not have recognised, but the whole subject matter must be different from that of the past. Both Hartshorne and Barth live in our age, and Dr.Gunton is the last person to take refuge in tradition for tradition's sake. Augustine and Anselm, as well as Plato and Aristotle, it is true, still figure even in the modern debate, which, to me at least, never ceases to be a matter of amazement, seeing how our world-view has changed, not to mention our science and technology. But their axioms are not accepted as authoritative or valid. On the contrary, Hartshorne is shown to pursue a goal which is neither classical theism nor atheism. His *Neoclassicism* 'bases its concept of God on the metaphysical insight that certain categories or characteristics are attributable both to the whole of reality and to all of its component parts' (p.80). There is the rub, for if this is not another version of pantheism 'it is difficult to conceive of this God being able to take the initiative on behalf of any of his creatures, precisely because they are not his creatures. On the

contrary, he is theirs.'(p81). Before Dr.Gunton reaches his final statement of the 'neoclassical dilemma' he works through the material with the finest comb, and I should spoil the fun (for it is intellectual fun) if I tried to summarise the neat distillation of possibilities and probabilities. One is left, as usual, with endless questions converging on the ontological argument.

Is becoming to be associated with God at all? The very question reminds me of one of my favourite little quotes in Proust's *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, when St.Loup says that ' the war does not get away from the laws of the old Hegel. It is in a state of perpetual becoming.' (La guerre n'échappe pas aux lois de notre viel Hegel. Elle est en etat de perpetuel devenir'). I insert this little piece to remind my reader what a linguistic nettle 'Becoming' itself is. Latin makes do with *fieri* ; the German *werden* is not identical with *become* or *devenir* . More important, from a theological point of view, the Hebrew HAYAH (from which, in some measure, YHWH = Lord) simply cannot be forced into linguistic analysis, for it, and its Semite cognates, does not move in the world of logic. The Greek complications (n.b. *gignomai*, *eimi*) are even more far-reaching, not to mention African and Asian families of language. Is it not, therefore, perilous to build a neo-classical model of Godhead, or attempt natural theology, on so-called linguistic grounds?

These matters are complicated indeed; but their real complexity is often hidden when we confine language to words only. What would be the case if we were to include, as we legitimately may, the communications in music and visual images? Add mathematical equations and proofs, and even our little human mental activities take on a truly cosmic range. Hence I should be inclined to show less patience to Hartshorne's rationalism than Colin Gunton.

You can see by now that we are not engaged in a technical discussion only, but in something that concerns us all. Is God, and therefore truth itself, a cultural or sociological product, to be understood and judged in these political and economic terms? Colin Gunton most appropriately passes on to Part II to examine Karl Barth's theological norms and presuppositions. It is not as simple a matter as changing gear and direction completely. A superficial knowledge of Barth may put him down as a *Biblicist tout court*. Gunton shows that Barth's exposition of Anselm (*credo ut intellegam*) is central, a focus of the later Church Dogmatics. Hence we are still concerned with Being and with the whole problem of existence in becoming.

Revelation, and not a concept of revelation, but the concrete God-in-Christ act, answers the quest in its own unique manner. Gunton shows in a masterly fashion

what it means when Barth is interpreted by Jungel: 'Where revelation conquers language, a *Word of God* takes place. The word of God *brings* the language to its true being' (better than 'to its proper expression', as Gunton notes). This God also becomes *essentially*, and Barth's Trinitarianism shows how and why. The flow of the argument is dense but also very clear. It deals with aspects of time, analogy, personality in order to manifest the nature of the revelation, of 'being in becoming', not of substance, but of the 'Thou', God himself. Why do we never hear of, and profit from, the 'eternal repetition', of God in self-revelation, in our contemporary plight of lamentable reductionism, where God's 'eminent temporality' is equated with ourselves?

Barth has been accused of neglecting the historical events of Jesus's existence and the eschatological dimension of the Holy Spirit. Gunton deals at length with this supposed Gnostic tendency, always comparing Barth with Hartshorne and classical conceptions of absolute Being. Instead of abstract concepts Barth looks at the concrete instance of God's freedom in love, namely the Cross. But how different is his theology of the Cross from Hartshorne's symbol of divine suffering, which, as Gunton has it, does not spell out that death is conquered, but has the last word. The neoclassical theism is finally condemned for what it is, Process theology - with an 'ineffectual weakling' at the centre who, as it were, divinises the world after the event. This is idolatry, and Gunton rightly closes the discussion with the question why some modern theologians should want to employ this philosophy in defence of their faith. This book deserves the most careful attention.

Ulrich Simon

FAITH IN CHRIST. By Robin Gill. Mowbrays. 1978. 90pp.80p.

As the figure of Jesus Christ stands at the centre of the Christian Faith it is only to be expected that Christology should be at the centre of Christian theology. But not since the fourth century has there been such a vigorous attempt on the part of theologians to probe the mysteries of the Messiah's being as there has been in our own century; and not since the disputes of that early century have controversial issues about his person and work seemed so divisive, and differing positions so staunchly held and argued. But contemporary thinkers and writers differ from their forbears in their obsession with the concept (created partly by the rise of historical and sociological disciplines) of 'relevance'. It seems that all aspects of the church's life: its forms of worship and prayer, its moral attitudes, and, above all, its doctrinal formularies have to be tried at the bar of contemporary

culture. So it is hardly surprising that a man who is both a priest and a sociologist, Robin Gill, should add his contribution to the spate of books on the relevance of the Christian claims in the modern world that has been flowing from the publishing houses during the last twenty years.

In his preface Mr. Gill says that he has been trying to write this book for twelve years. I cannot help remarking that the result of twelve years effort does not strike me as impressive. It is not a book intended for theological specialists, it deliberately eschews technical language as far as possible and aims at popular appeal. But a book need not lack distinction on that account, and it is as much a question of style and language as anything else. Some of C.S. Lewis's most popular books have great distinction, and what gives them their distinction is not only the perception of their thought but the vividness and precision of the language. Mr. Gill's arguments are clear enough, but they are flatly, and often too generally, presented to make a real impact on the reader.

The author sets out the problem he intends to answer in the opening paragraph of the first chapter.

Certain traditional claims about the specialness or uniqueness of Christ seem increasingly incredible. If it abandons these claims, it may cease to exist as a distinct religion. If it continues to maintain them, it may look more and more peculiar and become the property of isolated groups of people with no real place in Western society.

And in the following chapters he covers ground that has been covered many times by scholars before, in particular the vexed question of the seeming inability of the modern mind to grasp the relationship of divine and human in Jesus and the meaning of the attempts of the ancient definitions to express this relationship. Along the way he does have some interesting points to make about the nature of our society and the position of Christianity in it, and he dispels some popular misconceptions about religion in the modern world.

For most Westerners there is little serious temptation to become Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus... Their main option is still between Christianity and irreligion, not between Christianity and one of the other world religions.

He examines the traditional approach to the understanding of Jesus "from above" (he calls it 'the Word made Flesh' approach) and some modern attempts to destroy this with an approach "from below". All well and good, but it is in his last chapter where he purports to offer an alternative that he is at his most disappointing.

My point has not been to support a persistence instead of a decline, theory of religion, but rather to demonstrate that the evidence of religious change in the West is thoroughly confused - too confused, anyway, to bear the weight of the radical proposals suggested.

I certainly think this is true, but I do not think I needed Mr. Gill to tell me so. He is, after all, a sociologist and yet he offers no sociological reason why the approach "from above" (or "from below") is unacceptable to modern man. But that is not the main burden of my complaint. It is this: In the end what Mr. Gill is pleading for is the holding of the two "approaches" in balance.

The suggestion, then, that we continue to use both approaches to express our convictions about the uniqueness of Christ, may not appear so impossible. Once we admit that both approaches

use human language obliquely and that both contain inherent weaknesses when used separately, the continued use of both seems appropriate. But this balance, this dual approach, is, I believe, what orthodox Christianity, however it may have been misinterpreted down the ages, has been expressing ever since the first great ecumenical council of the church in the year 325.

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