

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN GERMAN THEOLOGY

WILLIAM H. BERNHARDT

The nature and the coming of the Kingdom of God have long been favorite subjects of interest to German theologians. During the past sixty years many important studies in this area have been published by them. The influence of their thought upon contemporary American religious thinking is now very evident. Consequently, it may be of value to investigate the direction in which German thought was moving prior to the outbreak of the war in order to determine probable trends in our own thinking.

It is, of course, a well-known fact that German theological trends soon find their way into our churches and schools. One needs but recall the effect of the preaching of Karl Barth during the first World War in order to understand the nature of the impact of German thought upon British and American thought. Despite the fact that educationally Germany has suffered greatly during the present war, the religious life of the country has apparently weathered the storm quite well. Furthermore, the experiences of pastors and teachers during the five years of war will undoubtedly produce convictions of various types. The result may be the emergence of a new Biblicism, a new eschatology, or a deepened ecclesiasticism. In any event, German thinkers will again be read by American students, and many of them will be followed.

Another reason for considering German discussions of the Kingdom of God is that such investigation may explain in part the readiness of the German people to follow the exponents of the Third Reich. Granted that the basic factors responsible for the emergence of Hitler were economic and so-

cial in character, the willingness of Germans to follow him may be due in part to their understanding of the nature of the Kingdom of God. If this should be true, it may be advisable for us to scrutinize with some care the spread of Neo-Orthodoxy with its conception of the Kingdom of God in the Protestant churches in America.

The Kingdom of God may be defined provisionally as the name given to the theory or theories of human destiny developed and maintained by certain groups of Christians. The term "destiny" is used advisedly. Its primary meaning is that which is determined, and that irrevocably. It is at this point that many theories of the Kingdom of God differ from the host of Utopias called variously "The New Deal," "The New Order," or "The New Coprosperity Sphere." Most Utopias, literary and political alike, represent ideals which may conceivably find some degree of realization in some indefinite future. The Kingdom of God, in many of its expressions, is destined to come at some predetermined time, and primarily through divine instrumentality.

The question of the Kingdom of God normally includes three closely interrelated problems: First, when is the Kingdom to be realized, and where? Second, precisely what is the nature of this Kingdom to be? Third, What factor or factors are primarily responsible both for its nature and its appearance? Many other questions may be asked; these appear to be central.

I

The history of the development of German thought concerning the Kingdom of God was traced by a Swedish

theologian a few years ago.¹ He began with the dominant trend characteristic of the late nineteenth century and followed the changes in thinking well into the present century. According to Holmström, late nineteenth century German theology was influenced markedly by Albrecht Ritschl, for many years professor at the University of Goettingen. Ritschl's thought was determined in large measure by the philosophy of Rudolph Hermann Lotze (1817-1881), whose idealism has affected many American philosophers and theologians. God, according to Ritschl, had love as his primary attribute. This loving God created the world for the purpose of providing a place wherein there might be developed a "moral kingdom of created spirits."² With this conception of the nature of God and the purpose of the universe, the Kingdom of God had to be a moral or ethical kingdom. Furthermore, it had to have primary reference to this world. This does not mean that heaven or immortality was excluded, but that primary attention was given to the here and now. It was this description of the Kingdom of God which led Holmström to write that for late nineteenth century German thinkers, the Kingdom of God was defined in ethical, monistic and immanent terms.³ The Kingdom was ethical in that moral growth was its objective; it was monistic in that there was no sharp division drawn between human behavior here and hereafter; it was immanent in that the Kingdom of God had its roots in human behaviour and its fruits in human values.

It is obvious that this conception of the Kingdom of God found its model in the political Liberalism characteristic of the same century. Political Liberalism, the dominant ideology in European and American thought, was based upon the view that both man and nature were rational and good. As

a consequence of this view of human nature, the most effective method in social relations was that of persuasion. Given the continuous application of aggressive goodwill and the right to freedom of speech, the highest human ideals were achievable. John Strachey used the term "progressive gradualism" to describe this type of political thinking. It provided the basis for many of the theories of the Kingdom of God in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to political Liberalism and many theories of the Kingdom of God, the world was in process, and the gradual realization of political and religious ideals was its goal.

Whereas the political phase of this ideology was based upon an idealistic metaphysics and a romantic theory of man, the theological phase rested upon biblical foundations. These biblical foundations were shattered when Johannes Weiss published his important work on *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* in 1892. In this volume, Weiss denied the Ritschlian theory of the biblical basis for maintaining that the Kingdom of God was ethical, monistic and immanent. He insisted that when Jesus spoke about the Kingdom, he had in mind an order which was 'thoroughly religious, dualistic and transcendent'.⁴ Twenty or more years later, this emphasis in Weiss' work received the weighty support of Albert Schweitzer in the second edition of his *Vom Reimarus zu Wrede*, published in 1913. Schweitzer accepted the view that the Kingdom as proclaimed by Jesus was

¹ Holmström, Folke: "Das eschatologische Denken der Gegenwart," *Die Zeitschrift fuer Systematische Theologie*, XII (1935), No. 2, pp. 314-359.

² Ritschl, *Justification and Reconciliation* (Eng. trans. edited by H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macauley), 2nd ed. 1902, p. 280.

³ Holmström, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

⁴ Holmström, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

eschatological in character, and deduced from this the view that the ethic of Jesus was primarily an interim ethic. As such, it was relevant to the interval between its proclamation by Jesus and the actualization of the transcendent Kingdom itself. Thus the ethics of Jesus provided no basis for the Ritschlian theory of the Kingdom of God.

The eschatological character of the Kingdom of God in the preaching of Jesus received added emphasis during the past three decades. With the publication of Karl Barth's *Der Römerbrief*, especially its 1922 edition, interest in the eschatology of the Kingdom of God was deepened. Theology presently became "eschatological theology" for many German theologians. By 1931, Heinz-Dietrich Wendland could state categorically that only those who accepted an eschatology which maintained the double meaning of "Time and Eternity" could hope to reach an adequate understanding of the New Testament.⁵ The same position is maintained in some contemporary schools of New Testament investigation. Rudolph Bultmann, to mention but one name, accepts the general Barthian approach to this problem with few if any important modifications.⁶

The change in theological climate to which we here refer may be presented in another manner. Georg Wehrung states that the Reformation may be viewed as an attempt to return theologically from the Greek type of thinking to a Hebrew and early Christian type. The recent change in German thinking may thus be viewed as one more attempt to change the basic structure of Christian thinking from Greek to Hebrew.⁷ Nineteenth century liberalism had a Greek intellectual foundation; contemporary German theology a biblical, that is, Hebrew and early Christian foundation.

The term "eschatology" has been used thus far without specific defini-

tion. The word has been subjected to many and varying explications. The basic problem appears to be the failure on the part of many definers to take into consideration the plane of reference from which the definition takes its meaning. When Aristotle defined man as a rational animal, his plane of reference was of course the whole animal kingdom. Man, according to Aristotle, must be viewed as primarily animal, but he differed from other animals in important respects. He was rational whereas, according to Aristotle, other animals were not. Man was an animal who thinks. When Aristotle adopted animal' as his definitional plane of reference, there were very few alternatives left to him. Had he taken some other plane of reference, he might have arrived at quite a different definition. This is but to say that the definitional plane of reference, what traditional logic called the "genus" or "class," is of primary importance in meaningful definition.

The plane of reference for the term "eschatology" as used in this discussion is, obviously, Ritschl's conception of the Kingdom of God as ethical, monistic and immanent. When German theologians of the present and recent past apply the term "eschatology" to the Kingdom of God, they are denying in detail the Ritschlian theory. According to Ritschl, the Kingdom was ethical in that man's choices were effective instruments in its progressive realization; it was monistic in that the coming Kingdom would be historically continuous with the present social order; it was immanent in that it included no dualistic world-view as nec-

⁵ Cf. his *Die Eschatology des Reiches Gottes bei Jesu*, as reported by Holmström, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

⁶ Cf. Bultmann, *Jesus* (Eng. translation is entitled *Jesus and the Word*, New York, 1934).

⁷ Wehrung, "Heilsgeschichte," in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, II (1928), 1757.

essary to its realization or fulfilment. When recent and contemporary German theologians use the term "eschatology" to characterize the Kingdom of God we may assume that they are using it to indicate the antithesis of each of these Ritschlian claims. As we shall note presently, they are inclined to view the Kingdom of God in ontological or metaphysical rather than ethical terms. They believe that the Kingdom, when it comes, will not be continuous with present socio-political institutions, including the Christian Church. Furthermore, the forces primarily responsible for its coming are not natural and human; they are transcendent in character. The Kingdom of God, when defined in eschatological terms, is a thoroughly transcendent order which will eventually replace or supplant human and natural conditions.⁸

Harald Diem, in "Das eschatologische Problem in der gegenwertigen Theologie" states that by the year 1939 eschatological interest no longer dominated religious thought in Germany. He maintained that the interest had now shifted to the field of Church dogmatics.⁹ But this does not mean, in so far as we can determine in the light of the information available since 1939, that the Kingdom of God had undergone redefinition. It merely means that the thinkers involved believed they had completed this phase of their system-building, and were now attacking another phase of their total problem. It does not mean that the Ritschlian conception of the Kingdom of God has been reinstated.

II

The evidence for the view that contemporary German theologians reject the Ritschlian theory of the Kingdom of God is available to any interested observer. If one will examine the writings of these theologians, he will discover rather widespread agreement in the rejection of the view that his-

tory is a continuous affair, beginning with the creation of man and continuing into the fully realized Kingdom of God. Thus Paul Tillich insists that the Kingdom is and always will be "transcendent" to history. Its primary function is that of serving as a judgment upon every form of human organization.¹⁰ This is a definite denial of the conception of "progressive gradualism" and of historic continuity. Another German theologian, Heinz-Dietrich Wendland, writing in 1929, insisted that the ethic of jurisdiction was essentially as eschatological ethic or an interim ethic. He affirmed that it must be such since "the earth and life are but an interim between Creation and Summation."¹¹ As for the Kingdom of God, it was "not a human-historical community."¹²

This general position is maintained by such well-known German writers as Karl Heim, professor of Theology in the University of Tuebingen, Otto Piper, formerly of Germany and more recently professor in Princeton Theological Seminary, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, to mention a few of the more prominent men. They are in agreement in their denial of "progressive gradualism," the view that the Kingdom of God is ethical, monistic and immanent.

It would appear that the attitude assumed by these representative German theologians would preclude them from active participation in social activities. This is not the case. They are in agreement that even though the Kingdom of

⁸ Cf. Holmström's analysis of the sharp antithesis involved in the positions of Ritschl and Johannes Weiss.

⁹ Diem, H., "Das eschatologische Problem in der gegenwertigen Theologie," *Theologische Rundschau* (Tuebingen, 1939), VI, 246ff.

¹⁰ Tillich, P., *The Interpretation of History*, New York, 1936, pp. 57f.

¹¹ Cf. his "Zur Grundlegung der christlichen Sozialethik," *Die Zeitschrift fuer systematische Theologie*, Vol. VII (1929) p. 27.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 33

God is an extra-mundane or supra-historical affair, it does have relevance for the contemporary scene. Karl Barth, who vigorously denounced the ethico-social theory of the Kingdom for two decades, does not interpret this opposition to mean that the Christian is thereby relieved of all responsibility for positive action in the present world. In 1939, at one of the most intense moments in western history, he reaffirmed his belief in the "omni-competence"—to use H. M. Kallen's term—of Jesus Christ, and the certainty of the coming of the Kingdom. He stated, at the same time, that faith in Jesus Christ implied specific services on the part of the believer. One of these services was that of witnessing to Jesus Christ; the other consisted in making this "witnessing" effective in terms of contemporary issues. The primary issue in 1939, according to Barth, was the rise to power of the National Socialist party in Germany. He refused to see National Socialism as simply a political party; it was, in fact, a new Islam, a new religion which had risen to oppose and destroy Christianity. Hence, even though a Christian could not oppose it as a political party, he was obligated to do so as a pagan religion.¹³

Two years later Barth wrote his celebrated "Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland" in which he urged British Christians to support the war against Hitler as a Holy War. The State, so he said, is a divine institution even as is the Church. Both State and Church should therefore be instruments in the hands of God. It is possible, however, that a State may fall into the hands of evil men, who may corrupt it and transform it from an instrument of righteousness into an instrument of evil. This was the condition in Germany according to Barth. Nothing now remained for Christians except to destroy the National Socialist party in all of its forms. British Christ-

ians were urged to consider their own nation a divine instrument in the hands of God to be used to destroy the powers of Evil in charge of German affairs.

Other German thinkers are less bellicose than Barth. At the same time they interpret certain forces at work in the socio-political scene as "demonic" powers, and are convinced that it becomes the duty of Christians to oppose these destructive forces in every possible way.¹⁴ H-D. Wendland, writing in 1937, recognized the evil in both National Socialism and Communism. At the same time, he believed that there might be some good in both. Instead of condemning them absolutely, as Barth did National Socialism two years later, he insisted that the Christian should learn to discriminate the good in such movements from the evil. As a Christian, he should support the good and oppose the demonic or evil.¹⁵

The Kingdom of God for recent German theologians is thus supra-historical in character but with some relevance to contemporary historical existence. It must never be identified with any form of socio-political organization; it is always transcendent to any and every social order achieved or achievable by man in history. Its primary meaning for historical experience is that of critic: The Kingdom of God floats, as it were, above history mirroring historical defects and deficiencies. Beyond that, it would appear to have little meaning so far as present human historical experience is concerned.

III

Another question concerning human communities, among them the Kingdom of God, is that which Aristotle called "efficient causality." What are

¹³ Cf. his *The Church and the Political Problems of the Day*, (New York, 1939).

¹⁴ Tillich, P., *The Interpretation of History*, New York, 1936, pp. 58ff.

¹⁵ Wendland, H-D., in *The Kingdom of God and History*, Chicago, 1937, pp. 191f.

the forces or factors responsible for the realization or actualization of desired or desirable forms of ethico-social communities or fellowships? This is, in effect, the basic problem in the philosophy of history: **What are the determinants operative in or upon historical evolution?** This question is too complex to be considered in a paragraph. It may be possible, however, to outline the categories into which these determinants may be classified. This will provide a plane of reference from which to interpret recent German thought.

It appears to be possible to include all theories of historical determinants in three categories. The first of these may be called environmental. Beginning with an historical process, such as Western Culture, one may seek in the geographic, climatic or geopolitical factors for the causes responsible for its present forms. Since the close of the last war, men like H. J. Mackinder, Karl Haushofer and Nicholas J. Spykman have investigated the so-called "power-potentials" of the modern world with specific attention to space and raw materials. The significance of Iran and Irak for the world's oil-production and of the East Indies for rubber suggest the relevance of space and raw material factors. The vast expanse of Russia, into which her armies could retreat, exchanging space for time in which to build up her armies and armament and from which they could then advance against her foes, suggests the relevance of space as such to political fortunes.¹⁶ Other students have considered climatic factors as primary cultural determinants. Ellsworth Huntington has investigated the effects of climate upon cultural evolution in some detail. He believes there is considerable evidence to support the view that the decline of the Roman civilization may be attributed to unsatisfactory cyclical climatic conditions.¹⁷ Still others select disease, due in part to environmental conditions, as responsible

for the rise and fall of cultures.¹⁸ This list of environmental factors may be extended indefinitely. Those we have listed are sufficient to indicate the nature of this first category of cultural determinants.

The second category consists in ethico-social factors or forces. This has been one of the more popular among philosophers and historians. Oswald Spengler's theory of cultures as organic, with a life-cycle as specific as that of a given individual, including birth and death, is one of the better known statements of this position. Nietzsche's "Will to Power" as socialized in Hocking's "Will-to-power-for-others" is another of these ethico-social interpretations of cultural determinants. One of the latest of these theories is presented by R. T. Flewelling. He agrees with those who find the sources of historic evolution within society rather than without. He differs with them to some extent in that he places his emphasis upon the conscious, rational factors in persons and groups rather than in the instinctive or emotional. He believes the West can survive if it develops a new ideology, one which makes the individual person central. His thesis may be stated briefly: Only as personal rather than mechanical or environmental factors dominate ideologies can cultures survive.¹⁹

The third category into which theories of cultural determinants may be classified consists in supra-historical or extra-natural factors. The ancient Hebrew theory of the Messianic

¹⁶ One may consult Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics*, (New York, 1942), for a good statement of this position.

¹⁷ Cf. Huntington, "Climatic Change and Agricultural Exhaustion as Elements in the Fall of Rome," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, XXXI, (Feb. 1917), pp. 173ff.

¹⁸ Cf. Jones, W. H. S., *Malaria: A Neglected Factor in the History of Greece and Rome*, (Cambridge, 1907).

¹⁹ Flewelling, R. T., *The Survival of Western Culture* (New York, 1943)

hope, and the various Christian theories of the apocalyptic Kingdom of God are well-known instances of this view. The basic factor in this category is the final authority and power of God. The Kingdom will come when God determines that it shall come. Human beings may prepare themselves for it; they may even engage in some activities which prepare the way for the coming Kingdom, but its coming depends finally upon God and His power.

Contemporary German theologians are in general agreement that the power finally responsible for the coming of the Kingdom of God is God Himself defined in terms of transcendent power. Holmström, in the article referred to above,²⁰ presents evidence to show that German theological thinking is basically eschatological, and that it is directly antithetical to the moralistic, monistic and immanent ideology of Ritschl. Ritschl believed that the forces actually operative in cultural evolution were ethico-social in character. God was immanent in historical evolution, and individuals and organizations could further or hinder the progressive realization of the Kingdom of God by their moral choices. The Kingdom was progressively realizable in history, and the forces upon which we had to rely were historical forces. Recent German thinkers find little if any meaning or truth in this view of history and historical determinants. They are convinced of man's inability and of history's deficiencies. They find their only hope in God as transcendent power.

As one considers the writings of many recent German religious leaders, he discovers that they have adopted a theory of the Kingdom of God which tends to remove all final significance from human historical experience as a continuing process. They may find supreme significance in some period in the past, or in some moment of 'decision' in a given individual's experi-

ence, a decision which determines one's destiny forever. But the normal day-by-day decisions made by individual persons in the normal course of events have little, if any, meaning for the Kingdom of God as such. Furthermore, this theory of the Kingdom of God deprives time of most of its normal meaning. The over-worked phrase, "time is of the essence," is not a German theological phrase. It is eternity, not time, which is meaningful. Finally, human power and human intelligence, important though they may be in technological areas, are of very minor importance so far as the Kingdom of God is concerned. According to the nineteenth century Liberal, idealistic theories of the Kingdom of God, human thought and human energy were of primary importance. The nineteenth century Kingdom was a Kingdom of God and Man, and man was considered a significant partner of God in its progressive realization. According to recent German theologians, the Kingdom is a *Kingdom of God*. Men may share in it as recipients, under predetermined conditions, but they may not determine either its form or the time of its coming.

German theologians, it appears, have lost faith in both man and history. They have lost faith in human reason, and are insisting that men return to the Bible and to the Reformers. They have lost faith, also, in the meaningfulness of historic and contemporary social experience. They do not find in a study of normal human experience that which provides any clue to the nature of human destiny or to the better methods whereby human good may be achieved. With this double depreciation—of reason and history—there has gone a concomitant heightening of appreciation of revelation and transcendent power.

²⁰ Cf. p. 106 above.

IV

This loss of faith in reason and history has become part of much contemporary American religious thinking. The name which American theologians apply to this point of view is Neo-Orthodoxy. President John A. Mackay of Princeton Theological Seminary has recently presented this position in a most persuasive form. He insists that humanity has lost its way, and despairs of human reason and present experience as adequate sources of hope. He believes we must return to the past, to revelation as given in the Bible. To make this position reasonable, he relates the following experience showing the value of the backward look: "My summer vacations were usually spent by the shores of a sea loch in Western Scotland. The local fishermen taught me where the best haddock banks lay, and how to find my way thither by observing certain landmarks in the hills behind the shore."²¹ This attitude, which he calls a "boatman philosophy," is thus presented to American religious readers as necessary to the resolution of our social difficulties. It is not human reason and careful investigation and analysis of humanity's social experience upon which he would have us rely. Instead, we should rely upon revelation. In the same way, he would have us rely upon the "power of God" for our help in social matters rather than upon environmental or ethico-social factors. "There is power in the God who comes to us in the Hebrew-Christian tradition, which is our heritage, to pilot us through the darkness and neutralize all the natural tendencies to impotence and dissolution."²²

This change in American theological thought may be traced quite readily in the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr since 1932. In that year he published his important volume on *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. He noted some of the apparently irreconcilable conflicts between individual and group morality

characteristic of western society. He found it difficult to believe that we could progress without recourse to such 'oversimplifications' as the Kingdom of God, Communism or Kultur. At the same time, these oversimplifications impede the smooth functioning of rational thought. His answer to the difficulties then confronting western man was to balance reason and these oversimplifications in such way that both could function somewhat effectively. Since that time he has been moving closer and closer to the German view sketched above. In 1935, he sought some solution of the conflict between reason and fanaticism by recourse to paradox.²³ Two years later, he gave up all hope of finding succor for the human race in human reason and historic experience. He stated specifically that our only hope lies in a kingdom "not of this world."²⁴ Thus in five years, from 1932 to 1937, he travelled from a position which involved at least a modicum of faith in man and this world to one which denied meaning and significance to both.

There may be some justification for the emergence of pessimistic and defeatist philosophies and theologies in Europe. Since the signing of the treaty of Mersen in 870 A. D., the treaty which started France and Germany on their careers as sovereign states, Europe has been embroiled in a series of wars. When one considers the last thousand years of European history, studded as it is with wars and other forms of social explosions, he can un-

²¹ Mackay, John A., *Heritage and Destiny*, (New York, 1943), pp. 11f. Others who adopt similar points of view are Niebuhr, R., *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I (1942); II (1943); Kroner, Richard, *The Primacy of Faith*, (New York), (1943); Ferre, Nelse F. S., *Return to Christianity*, (New York, 1943).

²² Mackay, *op. cit.*, pp. 103f.

²³ Cf. his *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York, 1935), p. 233.

²⁴ Cf., his *Beyond Tragedy*, (New York, 1937), p. 284.

derstand and sympathize with the world-weariness of some Europeans. He can understand some of the factors which produced Spengler's deterministic view of history, and Karl Barth's depreciatory view of reason and history. There is, however, no equivalent justification for the adoption of similar attitudes on the part of American thinkers. We are a new people, a social amalgam whose constituent elements were drawn from every people on earth. We are on a new continent, one which has not been farmed intensively for a thousand years. Thus both the environmental and social phases of

American culture indicate a different type of attitude toward the future from that characteristic of continental Europe. We need an aeroplane pilot's philosophy rather than a boatman's. When our culture is a thousand years old, and our environment has had to support a dense population for nearly that long, we may be ready for an ideology which depreciates reason and historical experience. For the present, we need a vigorous, enthusiastic expanding philosophy to capture the imagination of a vigorous, enthusiastic and expansive culture.