Theology and the Vision of Greatness

HARVEY H. POTTHOFF

THE general theme of this series of articles is "Theology In A Space Age." Our concern is not simply with satellites and space rockets, but with the fact that much new information concerning man and the universe has become available to us in recent years. One scientist writes, "The new knowledge built up by the world's astronomers in the past forty years is many times that of all time before."[1]

In many fields men are rethinking basic presuppositions and reformulating concepts with amazing results. Someone asked Einstein how he discovered relativity. He replied, "I challenged an axiom." In this series of discussions we are asking if the spirit of inquiry and our new information concerning man and the universe have implications for religious life and thought.

In this article we shall consider certain historical backgrounds which are essential for an understanding of our current theological situation. We shall suggest that in entering the space age we are entering an era of history calling for a "vision of greatness" in religious life and thought. The call of today is not for regression, but for creative, imaginative advance.

In succeding articles we shall look at three major doctrines — those of Man, God, and the Church. The purpose is not to present a systematic theology, but to suggest possible approaches to these doctrines consistent with our growing information. In all of this will be the underlying assumption that recent notices of the death of liberalism have been exaggerated.

Alfred North Whitehead once wrote, "That religion will conquer which can render clear to popular understanding some eternal greatness incarnate in the passage of temporal fact."[2] If this series of articles has a text, that's it. In a similar vein Whitehead wrote, "Religions commit suicide when they find their inspirations in their dogmas.[3] On still another occasion he wrote, "Religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science. Its principles may be eternal, but the expresion of those principles requires continual development."[4]

Would we not agree that the Christian ministry at its best is a continuing call to a vision of greatness? To help men glimpse the dimension of greatness in the basic processes of existence, in the depths of their own souls, in day by day events, in the beckoning goals of life, is our privilege and responsibility.

Insofar as theology serves in articulating the pervasive and over-arching greatness of God, and thus serves in inspiring heightened morale and a deepened sense of meaning in response to the vision of greatness, it is serving a religious function. But when theology deteriorates into the giving of reasons for repeating someone else's dogma, vitality goes out of it. Living theology has a forward thrust and is continually in process of recreation. There is nothing quite so dead as dead

[1] Harlow Shapley, *Of Stars and Men,* Boston: Beacon Press, 1958, p. 66.

HARVEY H. POTTHOFF is Professor of Christian Theology at The Iliff School of Theology. This is the first of a series of lectures given during the Annual Week of Graduate Lectures. The entire series will appear in subsequent issues.

[2] A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas,* New York: The MacMillan Co., 1933, p. 41.

[3] A. N. Whitehead, *Religion In The Making,* New York: The MacMillan Co., 1926, p. 144.

[4] A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World,* New York: The MacMillan Co., 1929, p. 270.

theology, nor anything quite so irreverent. Theology speaks of **God**, and God is a **living** God who makes all things new.

The Idea of Orthodoxy

One of the fascinating chapters in the unfolding story of Christian theology is the development of **the idea of orthodoxy.**

The light which radiated from the God-centered life and ministry of Jesus was a life and hope giving light. It shone into the hearts of men and women. They entered a new life and hope through this One, whom, they were sure, was of God. He communicated the reality of God in a saving way.

But the early church was the scene of much disagreement as to how to say these things. For example, not all Christians thought of Jesus in the same way. If you have not read Dr. Martin Rist's splendid article on "Some Aspects of New Testament Christology" in the autumn 1958 issue of RELIGION IN LIFE, you ought to. It demonstrates the point that the early Christianity out of which our New Testament writings came was not one of beautiful theological togetherness.

As time went on pressures emerged within the church for greater conformity of thought. Times does not permit our tracing out this story in detail, but we know the outcome. Over the years creeds and confessions emerged which for some achieved the status of orthodoxy. It is impossible to grasp the significance of these creeds and confessions unless we see them in the social-historical context out of which they came. To repeat them now, without awareness of that background, is likely to be little more than a vocal exercise.

There are, of course, many orthodoxies. It all depends on your frame of reference as to which orthodoxy you think is **the** orthodoxy. At the moment we are interested in the idea of orthodoxy itself. Orthodoxy suggests "correctness of religious belief, according to an authoritative standard; opposed to heterodoxy or heresy."[5]

Usually orthodoxy is linked with the idea of revelation as well as authority. The truth has been revealed, and now the revelation is communicated through some authoritative person, body of writing, or institution. On this basis there is a limit to the change which can be tolerated. Where theological innovations are contemplated, it is necessary to show that they are in line with what has been previously proclaimed.

Theology thus becomes oriented to the past. The past is not something we grow from or build upon. Rather, it is something to which we have a binding theological commitment. Axioms are not to be challenged. This preoccupations with the past is very much in evidence in the current scene, although sometimes wearing a new suit of clothes.

Where the orthodox idea prevails the task of theology is usually regarded as that of stating, proclaiming and developing ramifications of the "core faith" once delivered. In some instances the further task is accepted of showing how the core faith is not contradicted by contemporary knowledge or some world-view adopted as normative. In either case the underlying assumption is that Christian theology is oriented toward "a controlling and directing substance of faith which has enduring integrity."[6]

Some years ago John Mackay of Princeton wrote a book called **Heritage and Destiny.** In it he said, ". . . . what we need is to look back . . . and become boatmen. Why boatmen? Because the boatman moves intelligently forward by looking backward."[7] This is the counsel of orthodoxy, old or new.

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[5] F. G. Ensley, "Orthodoxy," *An Encyclopedia of Religion* (V. Ferm, ed.), New York: Philosophical Library, 1945.

[6] D. D. Williams, *What Present-Day Theologians Are Thinking,* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952, p. 15.

[7] J. A. Mackay, *Heritage and Destiny,* New York: The MacMillan Co., 1943, p. 12.

Contemporary reason, knowledge, experience may be interesting, but for theological purposes they are secondary in importance to what has been proclaimed in the past.

In his day Phillips Brooks thought the idea of orthodoxy was on the way out. He wrote, "Is not the whole sum of the matter this, that orthodoxy as a principle of action or a standard of belief is obsolete and dead? . . . the very principle of orthodoxy has been essentially disowned." But Phillips Brooks was mistaken. The idea of orthodoxy is very much with us, and catching on in all sorts of places. Some time ago President Julius S. Bixler of Colby College said that as a young man he wondered what heresy he would be fighting when he grew old. Imagine his surprise, now that he is somewhat older, to find that it is orthodoxy, of all things, that is in his hair, calling up his fighting ire.

The Idea of Liberalism

Let us turn now to the idea of liberalism, using the term "liberal" in its root sense of being "free." THE COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY suggests that the liberal is not "bound by orthodox tenets or established forms in political or religious philosophy." In other words, he is free to investigate, challenge presuppositions, reformulate concepts regardless of what has been said in the past. The liberal may come to any number of possible conclusions in theological matters — including some that are traditional; what distinguishes him is not solely his conclusions, but his methods of getting to them. The liberal places emphasis upon reason and investigative methods, seeking evidence relative to the problem at hand. Channing was speaking as a liberal when he said, "We indeed grant that the use of reason in religion is accompanied with danger. But we ask any honest man to look back on the history of the church, and say, whether the renunciation of it be not still more dangerous." The liberal seeks to be modern.

It was inevitable that the foundations on which the developing Christian orthodoxies rested should be challenged. The appeal to revelation, authority, tradition as the final courts of appeal became suspect with many thoughtful people. The world-views presupposed in traditional creeds and confessions were challenged. Developments in science and philosophy, the comparative study of religions, and newer methods of Biblical study became acids eating at the presumably invulnerable foundations of orthodoxy.

The eighteenth century was characterized by trust in reason. Sir Isaac Newton shook many of the devout with his picture of a world-machine, mechanical and law-abiding. Deism represented one attempt to reconcile such views with religious faith, arguing that it is logical to infer a transcendent God who created the universe, set it going according to fixed laws, and then stepped aside to watch it unfold. The watch-maker argument became popular. This device kept God at a considerable distance from natural processes, but it left room for Him in the scheme of things.

It was inevitable that in time the search-light of reason should be turned on rational religion itself. This David Hume did. He sought to be empirical, and raised the question as to what traditional beliefs could be derived from observable facts; he concluded virtually none. He challenged the traditional theistic arguments, minimized the idea of miracle, and challenged current views of causality. The eighteenth century closed with a real question as to whether religious belief could be built on deductive reason or on reason together with scientific knowledge.

This posed a problem for the religiously-inclined individual who was unwilling to turn to revelation and authority on the one hand, and who suspected that science was more threatening than helpful to faith on the

other. Under these circumstances it would appear that agnosticism was the only way out—unless, perchance, one could come upon a new theological method.

Probably most of us have been influenced, more than we realize, by three individuals who were concerned with finding such a method—and did. These persons were Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889). There were important differences in the thought and concerns of these men, yet they had enough in common that we may refer to them together as architects of an early form of Protestant liberalism. We refer to them as liberals in the sense that their method was non-authoritarian. They adopted a non-dogmatic methodology. In brief, their appeal was to something in the **inner life of man**—to some phase of experience.

Kant argued from moral experience. He said that whereas we cannot demonstrate God, freedom, and immortality on the basis of pure reason, one may postulate them on the basis of the practical necessities of the moral life. **God must be what man's moral insight and experience demands that he be.** Thus, for Kant religion became an adjunct of morality and God was brought into the picture on the level of moral experience. By using this method Kant neatly sidestepped the embarrassments of science; the decisive appeal was to something absolute within.

Adopting a somewhat similar methodology Schleiermacher appealed to **religious experience,** or, as he preferred to call it, the religious consciousness. The essence of religion, he insisted, is "the feeling of absolute dependence." This feeling he regarded as universal. Now, the being with whom we are in touch in this consciousness of absolute dependence is God. Thus, Schleiermacher defined God as the universal, all-controlling reality disclosed in our consciousness of complete dependence. God is a factor in man's religious consciousness. Experience discloses a relation of dependence on **something** which by definition is God. The task of theology, then, is the systematic interpretation of this experienced relationship.

It is important to see what is happening when this sort of thinking takes over. Obviously, it provides a method of side-stepping the claims of science on the one hand, and absolute authority on the other, as the final court of appeal in theological matters. If one can find supportive data from science for one's conclusions, well and good; but this is not decisive.

However, this ultimate appeal to religious experience comes at a high price. As Burtt points out, "God is no longer the central fact in religion or the ultimate principle in theology. His place is taken by man's religious experience. The religious experience of men and women becomes the decisive fact and the final court of appeal by which we test the validity of any theological concept—the concept of God along with others."[8]

Ritschl likewise sought escape from what seemed to be the embarrassments to faith coming from science and historical research. He neatly divided the spheres of science and religion, holding that science is concerned with objective, quantitative data, whereas religion is concerned with value judgments—and never the twain need meet. Value experience—and more specifically value experience induced by the historical Jesus—became for him the distinctive data with which Christian theology is to work. Following this line of reasoning he held that Jesus has for us the religious value of God. Ritschl is uniquely responsible for the particular form of Christo-centric emphasis which came to characterize the early liberalism. Here the emphasis was upon certain types of value experience which Christ gives, induces, or leads men into.

[8] E. A. Burtt, *Types of Religious Philosophy,* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951, p. 288.

The particular expression of early liberalism known as personalism drew heavily on the work of Kant, Schleiermacher, and Ritschl so far as method is concerned. Borden Parker Bowne played a major role in developing the philosophy of personalism. Just as Kant had absolutized the moral sense, and Schleiermacher had absolutized the sense of dependence, and Ritschl, the experience of Christ, so Bowne absolutized the experience of being a person. Self-experience was the sure starting point of his system, and the measure of all things. The experience of selfhood was the key-hole through which one could look into the heart of the universe.

Thus, Bowne wrote in 1887, "Whatever our total nature (as persons) calls for, may be assumed as real, in default of positive disproof."[9] Here is the revealing clue to the system. It is presupposed that reality must be such as to grant what our natures—as persons—call for. A few years later, A. C. Knudson, employing the same method, wrote, "In theism we argue from man to God. We find in man the key to ultimate reality."[10]

What sort of God would seem most uniquely suited to round out this system? Quite obviously a deity whose central purposes are the creation and conservation of personal values, and the bringing to fulfillment the highest possibilities of our personal natures. This, of course, is precisely what personalism offers.

Let us note, not only how emotionally satisfying this doctrine is, but how well suited it was to the problem created by Darwin who published **The Origin of Species** just one hundred years ago, in 1859. This book was not received with universal acclaim in religious circles. Many said in effect, "Its teachings are incompatible with the Bible. We will have nothing to do with it." With his method, Bowne was able to get around this difficulty. He denied that the Bible is our final court of appeal in matters of theology. The appeal must be to the rational interpretation of what is given in self-experience. His was an analytic-deductive method. We are under no obligation to accept the Biblical account of creation, he said. It is quite reasonable to assume that God uses the method of evolution in carrying out his purposes.

To be sure, there were those who were certain that this man was a dreadful heretic. In due time he was brought to trial in one of the relatively few heresy trials in the history of the Methodist Church. He was vindicated and continued to teach at Boston University.

Perhaps this is enough to indicate how the early liberalism freed men from the authoritarian character and basis of prevailing orthodoxy and also provided a truce with science. We can readily see how this approach led to an optimistic view of man and the human situation. It gave great impetus to the social gospel. The Christian life was defined in personal-moral terms, with a strong activistic emphasis. It fitted in well with a widespread feeling of man's powers and possibilities, a mood which Oliver Wendell Holmes reflected in the writing of "The Deacon's Masterpiece" and its amazing collapse. The one-hoss shay, of course, referred to Calvinism.

Reactions To Liberalism

In the meantime, there were those in both Catholic and Protestant circles who could not rest content with the liberal goings-on in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Catholicism there was a tightening of church authority. The Syllabus of Errors was published in 1864 denying "that the Roman Pontiff can and ought to reconcile himself to, and agree with, progress, liberalism, and modern civilization." In 1870 the dogma of papal

[9] B. P. Bowne, *The Philosophy of Theism*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1887, p. 25.
[10] A. C. Knudson, *The Doctrine of Redemption*, Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1933, p. 90.

infallibility in matters of faith and morals was defined and proclaimed.

In Protestantism the fundamentalistic movement, designed to save the church from the evils of modernism, came into being. The theological seminaries, of course, early became centers of attack. On February 11, 1924, the Denver Times carried a six-column headline on the front page: "Modernist Fight Rends Iliff School."

In 1925 Methodist conservatives under the leadership of Harold Paul Sloan organized the Methodist League For Faith and Life, and published a monthly magazine, "Call to the Colors." In an article in the January, 1926 issue of the Christian Advocate, Bishop Edgar Blake opposed this movement and said he considered neither the Apostles' nor the Nicene creeds as authoritative documents, but historical pronouncements in a progressive Christianity. He asserted the inconsequential nature of the doctrine of the virgin birth. He said the acid test of Christianity is not the type of belief about Christ, but Christlikeness in living. Needless to say, the League For Faith and Life took out after the bishop and said his comments proved that you cannot trust the leadership of the church in doctrinal matters.

Sloan came to the 1928 General Conference with a petition bearing 10,000 signatures from forty-one states asking for a committee to investigate seminaries, pulpits, and Sunday school literature for evidence of disloyalty to Methodist doctrinal standards. It was voted down by a two-to-one vote.

Similar stories of fundamentalistic activities could be related in reference to other denominational groups.

Neo-Orthodoxy

As we come to Protestant theological thought of the more recent past the basic issues of purpose and method are still with us—although sometimes obscured. Much current theological talk is unproductive because of the failure to agree on the precise problem-areas to be considered. One is reminded of the three elderly, deaf Englishmen, whose train was pulling into a certain station. One said, "This is Wembley." The second objected, "No, this is Thursday." The third commented, "So am I; let's get off and get a drink." Plenty of words, but little communication.

Whether or not we bother, in many theological discussions, to define what it is we propose to talk about, the fact remains that underneath it all the questions of theological purpose and method keep asserting themselves. There are those who think of the primary task of Christian theology in **conserving** terms. There are others who draw upon the past but go on to stress **the critical and creative functions of theology.** There are those who endeavor to get at theological problems by appeal to revelation, authority, tradition. Others endeavor to utilize empirical, investigative techniques to greater advantage. Many of the sharpest tensions in current theological discussion revolve around these issues.

In succeeding articles I hope to get at the doctrinal side of these matters. Just now I am concerned with the prior question of how we propose to go about getting at theological questions. At the risk of over-simplifying things I have distinguished the orthodox and liberal approaches. While the orthodox and liberal traditions have long histories, they have come to more or less new expressions in the theological thought of the recent past.

On the one hand, we have the neo-orthodox movement, with which the names of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Reinhold Niebuhr have been associated—although there are differences in the thought of these men at various points. This movement is orthodox in the sense that it represents a return to the orientation of the orthodox-idea. It utilizes symbols, categories of thought, and in many instances concepts characteristic of orthodoxy—with special appeal to Reformation thought.

Karl Barth was for a time a Ritschlian liberal. Evidences of this may be found in the first edition of **The Epistle to the Romans.** However, the famous second edition, published in 1921, shows the radical transformation in Barth's thought. He has told of the impact on him by a meeting in 1920 with his teacher, Adolph Harnack, who challenged Barth to say something on the humanity of God. Barth's reply was a thunderous NO! Thus the "New Barth" emerged, denying that God is to be discerned in nature, man, conscience. The gospel of the wholly other God came to increasing expression, and the theology of crisis exerted its influence throughout the theological world.

Neo-orthodoxy has reacted against the rationalistic and optimistic emphasis in the early liberalism. It has found a fertile soil in the conditions surrounding two world wars, a major economic depression, the rise of new power structures, and international tensions.

D. D. Williams has defined neo-orthodoxy as "a term which designates that movement in contemporary Protestant theology which re-emphasizes the classic doctrines of God's transcendence, man's sin, and justification by faith, as over against the liberal conceptions of God's immanence, man's goodness, and his gradual improvement. The roots of the movement go back to emphases in Paul, Augustine, and Kierkegaard."[11] This is a helpful definition, although it focuses on the doctrinal aspect of things. My own view is that a prior issue which must be faced is that of method. Neo-orthodoxy is marked by its disparagement of "natural theology." It is a party to what Harold DeWolf has called "the religious revolt against reason." Its appeal is to revelation and Biblical authority.

It is interesting to observe points at which neo-orthodoxy has something of a new look. For one thing, it professes to go along with the results of modern methods of Biblical study. Whether there is a consistent follow-through is something else again. I refer now to what is claimed. Karl Barth, for example, has made much of how "radical" he really is when it comes to Biblical studies. It is precisely at this point that the fundamentalists have taken out after the neo-orthodox thinkers as being modernists in disguise. Neo-orthodox theologians want to be known as being strictly up-to-date when it comes to the Bible.

This raises the fascinating question as to how one can absolutize Biblical authority and still go along with higher criticism. The answer, of course, lies in those magic words—sacred history, myth, symbol. Claiming a Biblical unity (which many of us find hard to discover) we are told that God's revelation is found in the sacred history of his mighty acts. Fundamental in the reading and understanding of this history are myths and symbols—to be taken seriously, but not literally.

Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, makes much of this approach, referring to the return of Christ, the last judgment, and resurrection as fundamental **symbols.** In addressing the young ladies at Wellesley College some years ago Emil Brunner kept referring to the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, the fall. During the question-period he was asked if he cared to assign a date to this unhappy event. He laughingly replied that he did not think of the fall as an event in history at all. Every man is his own Adam, he said, and as for Eve—"I see hundreds of her before me."

Now this sounds very clever and sophisticated. You can have your cake and eat it, too. You can be a Biblicist and a higher critic, all at the same time. But as Dr. Lindsay Longacre used to say, this sounds fine if you say it quick. On second thought someone may ask, "Who is to tell us what the significant myths and symbols are and what they really mean? Obviously, we need an interpreter on this basis—who is he to

[11] D. D. Williams, "Neo-Orthodoxy," *An Encyclopedia of Religion* (V. Ferm, ed.).

be? Furthermore, one wonders what happens to the original intent of the Biblical writer himself. Millar Burrows writes, "The Old Testament has no doctrine of the fall of man."[12] It is as simple as that—the Old Testament has no doctrine of the fall of man. Now just what right do we have to utilize this material in reading meanings into it which the author never intended? When theologians are dealing with basic issues of theology, one might wish for a more responsible use of other people's material. Allegorizing is a many splendored thing, and wears different suits of clothes in different generations.[13]

There is another point at which we find a kind of newness in neo-orthodoxy. At least some of the older orthodoxies were built upon explicit world-views. The Nicene Creed, for example, presupposed a dualistic world-view and a substance metaphysics. Divinity was defined in terms of substance and the Nicene debote revolved around that presupposition. Supernaturalism has been a clear assumption of much if not most so-called "orthodox" Christian theology.

But here again, some neo-orthodox writers apparently want to have their cake and eat it, too—wanting to sound orthodox, but being unwilling to commit themselves to the world-views on which the major orthodoxies were raised. In a day when science is contributing to the formulation of new world-views neo-orthodoxy is in the position of trying to put new wine into old skins. In this predicament, the neo-orthodox theologian looks upon metaphysics as a field to be carefully avoided. One can be quite explicit about the gospel, he affirms, without getting entangled in the questions metaphysicians raise. As one theologian said recently, "This approach leaves many philosophical questions unanswered, but it takes care of redemption."

This again sounds fine if we say it quick. But if such terms as God and redemption have specifiable and designative significance, that significance must be in a context of things about which we need some information. We cannot go on talking seriously about God, man, salvation for long without getting into questions concerning the structure of the universe and those processes which profoundly condition man and the unfolding of events. It may not be without significance that some neo-orthodox theologians have had surprisingly little to say about God.

If a given theologian wishes to avoid getting involved in discussion concerning the implications of modern knowledge for specific doctrines, if he preers not to commit himself to a given world-view, if he prefers to concern himself with theological semantics or to devote his attention to appropriate symbols for use on the technique level of religion, that is certainly his privilege. But then he ought not try to sound like a serious theologian on the **conceptual** level. Certainly it would seem inappropriate for him to stand on the side-lines with a holier-than-thou attitude toward those who are trying to plow deeper in the conviction that knowledge has a great deal to do with faith, and philosophy of religion and theology ought to be closely related.

In his day Augustine sought to work out a theological synthesis, presupposing neo-Platonism as his base of operation. In his day, Thomas Aquinas developed his system against the background of Aristotelian philosophy. One reason that their systems stood the test of time as well as they did was that they recognized the important inter-play

[12] Millar Burrows, *An Outline of Biblical Theology,* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946, p. 168.

[13] For interesting comments by distinguished Biblical scholars on the use or misuse of the Bible by various contemporary theologians, see C. C. McCown, "Symbolic Interpretation," *Journal of Biblical Literature,* December, 1944, pp. 333-335, and Morton S. Enslin, "The Bible—Asset or Liability," *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin,* 1957-1958, pp. 67-84.

of metaphysics and theology. Any modern theology which hopes to stand for a time—and speak to the deeper questions of thoughtful men—must likewise recognize this inter-play, adopting a world-view based on contemporary information.

The reluctance of neo-orthodox thinkers to get into the metaphysical arena is not hard to understand. So much of the language they propose to use is better adapted to a prescientific world-view than to the world-as-known in the twentieth century. But the last thing a sophisticated exponent of neo-orthodoxy wants is to be appear to be anything but up-to-date. What he really wants is to carry new wine in old wine-skins, but if this turns out to be difficut, he will settle for the old wine-skins —and does. In the meantime, some interesting things happen on the doctrinal level. Of these things we shall speak in succeeding articles. Our primary concern at the moment is with the problem of method.

Neo-orthodoxy, then, has the look of newness in some respects. But when it comes to the crucial issue of theological purpose and method, it is oriented to the past. Its purpose is that of **conserving.** Its appeal is to revelation and Biblical authority. Thus, it endeavors to be true to the orthodox idea.

That neo-orthodoxy has been a corrective at certain points in the theological scene is obvious. That it is regressive at other points seems to me to be equally obvious. It has justly criticized the earlier liberalism for its overly-subjective methodology, and its tendency to define religion in moral terms, sometimes to the neglect of conflictive-frustrative aspects of human experience. It has pointed to elements in man which suggest he cannot be defined exclusively in rational-moral terms. It has pointed out that we must function in terms of historical possibilities, keeping at the job, even though we cannot reasonably hope for a static Utopia. But it is well to note that many liberals have been saying these things—and oftentimes better. There is something self-corrective in a dynamic liberalism, whereas, there is a limit to the possibilities of self-correction in orthodoxy—old or new.

On the other side of the ledger there are several criticisms which I think may justly be leveled at the neo-orthodox movement:

In its preoccupation with using and justifying traditional categories, it has tended to neglect the critical and creative functions of theology.

Its attack on reason and natural theology tends to cut off communication with scholars in other fields. This is inevitable if saving revelation is held to be discontinuous from knowledge gained through investigation of data by empirical methods. If new information concerning man and the universe does have important theological implications on the conceptual level, we shall never find it out following the lead of neo-orthodoxy.

Its use of the Bible too often vitiates the results of modern Biblical scholarship, while obscuring values to be found in the Bible when we permit it to speak for itself, out of its historical backgrounds.

In too many instances neo-orthodoxy has encouraged the inclination to exclude from the fellowship of "real Christians" those who do not articulate their faith within neo-orthodox patterns of thought.

In its insistence on the discontinuity of the Christian gospel and the cultural life of mankind—there being a pure gospel based on unique revelation —neo-orthodoxy offers little promise of help in dealing with major problems which confront us on a world-scale. In the years ahead we shall increasingly face the need for an imaginative approach to the non-Christian religions—with an awareness of the importance of the cultural soil out of which religions spring and in which they are nurtured. We are all inhabitants of the same planet. There must be communication among men of goodwill—

across national and religious lines. Norman Cousins has recently written, "Relion need not turn against itself to do what is now necessary. A basic unity already exists. That unity resides not in doctrine but in man himself. . . . Theology cannot survive without man. Theology therefore can transcend itself in the cause of man . . . what we can do is to try to get all to agree to the human proposition that spiritual resources are inherent in all men, that these resources, when summoned, can bring them closer to one another, and that the sacredness of life is not peculiar to any one creed."[14] Any realistic philosophy of missions in the world as it is must reckon with considerations such as these. The exclusiveness of much neo-orthodoxy gives us little help in this direction.

One cannot keep emphasizing the sinful nature of man, his frustrative and ambiguous situation, the non-redemptive character of history, while belittling the idea of progress, without something happening to the spark which kindles a vital social concern. To be sure, one can point to individuals who seem to be exceptions to the rule—but even in these instances one wonders to what extent their social interest is a product of their theology. Dr. Fosdick has written, "What saves neo-orthodoxy is that its theologians are so much better than their theology."

Over-preoccupation with the anxieties, frustrations, and guilt feelings of man—together with the judgmental aspect of God and the tendency to interpret Christian experience primarily in terms of "crisis" and "encounter" —can easily dull man's sensitivities to the sustaining, nurturing presence of God in human relationships and the environing world. Likewise, preoccupation with the sinfulness of man often leads to a minimizing of man's growth-potential and the steps of progress he has taken and is taking.

Neo-orthodox thinkers often appear to fail to distinguish between what Dr. W. H. Bernhardt has referred to as the re-interpretive (theological) and technique levels of religion. We have insistence on the part of exponents of neo-orthodoxy on the use of given terms and symbols as being normative for true Christians. On the other hand, we find a neglect of serious attention to the **designative** significance of many terms. I continue to be fascinated by how little neo-orthodoxy has contributed to discussion of the fundamental question of religion — the nature of God. Rather, the emphasis is on how things are supposed to happen and what symbols are to be used within the Christian circle. Neo-orthodoxy has made fashionable such terms as crisis, encounter, confrontation, I-Thou, ontological despair and so on. In some circles it seems quite sufficient to use these words to prove that one has seen the light. Unfortunately or fortunately, theology is a much more serious and technical discipline than some suppose. It is not simply a matter of current fashion, or to change the figure, a game of musical chairs in which one moves around in circles, ready to take a new position at the sound of almost any new note. To be sure, there are some neo-orthodox theologians who probe deeper. Unfortunately the movement itself has encouraged a superficiality in a good deal of popular theological talk. It seems oftentimes to confuse procedural matters of technique, with highly technical problems which exist on the reinterpretive level. It offers a vocabulary, but leaves a great deal to be desired in the systematization of concepts with designative significance.

In an interesting study Mary Thelen compares the thought of a distinguished American neo-orthodox theologian with liberal thought. She then writes, ". . . the greater significance given to the transcendence of God is achieved

[14] Norman Cousins, "Is God a Christian?" *Saturday Review of Literature,* February 28, 1959, p. 22.

not by finding any higher conception of the character of God but by lowering the virtue of man within history with which it is compared."[15] This statement points at a basic difficulty in neo-orthodoxy.

Neo-orthodoxy discovered the obvious truth that man does not always behave in rational and moral ways. He experiences conflict and anxiety, sometimes turning to destructive behaviour. His history is not one of escalator-like progress. His pride sometimes gets the best of him. Every contemporary liberal I know would say as much. But seizing on these things neo-orthodoxy has blown them up, making man's destructive propensities carry more weight than they should. If the early liberals attributed undue significance to certain forms of experience in revealing God to us, neo-orthodoxy is guilty of a similar fallacy in bringing God into the picture to fit a given image of man. Not only is the neo-orthodox image of man open to question, but the methodology involved in getting to God is equally open to question. God takes on a different stature, not through new insights into God, by way of loss of confidence in man. "There hath passed a glory from the earth."

In its methodology and in its minimizing of the resources of man in his quest for God and the good, neo-orthodoxy dims the vision of greatness.

A New Liberalism

When I entered theological seminary as a student a quarter of a century ago the "early liberalism" was the prevailing theological perspective in much of educated Protestantism. One felt a bit out of things if he did not go along with some variation of personalistic theism. What amazing changes we have witnessed in these years! Many current writers refer disparagingly to "the liberal era" as though it were a somewhat naive period which had best be forgotten after a few more attacks.

If such major shifts in thought can take place in a relatively brief period of time, one wonders what will take place in the next twenty-five years. Of this we may be certain—things will not stand still. The persistent questions of theological purpose and method will always be with us. The orthodox and liberal ideas will both be present, with variations.

My own hope and anticipation is that among the developments which lie ahead will be a resurgence of the liberal spirit, not in the sense of going back to the earlier liberalism, but going on from it. Much ground-work has already been laid, and there are signs of a receptiveness to a new chapter in theological thought. If neo-orthodoxy has had a corrective function, it has been accomplished. We are ready to push on to a more constructive chapter, drawing upon new insights which are ours.

The liberal tradition is in process of evolution and self-correction. The early liberalism rendered a significant service in renouncing dogmatism, affirming human strengths of reason and action, granting a hearing to science, releasing a social dynamic. But coming when it did, its empiricism was of a restricted sort. It placed disproportionate emphasis on the cognitive significance of the inner life of man, absolutizing given aspects of experience, making them the measure of all things, insisting that reality must be such as to bring these experiences to fulfillment. God became an adjunct of the moral life or of a given preferred form of religious experience, rather than the central organizing fact in religion, or the ultimate principle in theology. The early liberalism never did provide a very convincing approach to the problem of evil. In its emphasis upon religion as moral experience and personal fellowship, it often neglected some of man's deeper personal problems.

[15] Mary Thelen, *Man As Sinner In Contemporary American Realistic Theology,* New York: King's Crown Press, 1946, p. 115.

What, then, can we say initially of the new liberalism? It regards the function of theology as being a continuing critical and creative articulation of the intellectual phase of religion. Unlike orthodoxy, it does not regard its primary responsibility as the statement, defense, and elaboration of a core faith once delivered. It is oriented to the present and future, rather than to the past. It moves out from a profound sense of heritage, seeking to draw upon the rich resources of insight which have been bequeathed to us; but it holds that the Christian tradition is dynamic, creative, and unfolding. We honor the past most in building upon it and beyond it.

Its data are all-inclusive. Whatever data—from any source—which throw light on the human situation and on those realities, processes, and structures which impinge on the life of man in a determining way, giving character to the environing universe, are relevant.

The methodology is empirical in character. Conclusions drawn from other than investigative methods can be nothing more than guesses.

Its concern is with the meaning of religion in human experience—religion regarded as dealing with man's orientation—his attitudes, actions, adjustments, appreciations, aspirations within the universe which is his home. The new liberalism holds that maturing processes can and ought to take place in religious life and thought as well as in other phases of experience.

The ultimate focus in the new liberalism is upon God, not simply as a means to the fulfillment of given desires of man, but as the end to whom belong devotion and trust. The new liberalism is theo-centric, and is quite ready to contemplate the possibility that God's purposes are not exclusively anthropocentric.

It seeks communication with research workers in other fields of investigation. Its conclusions are subject to continuing correction.

In the new liberalism there is a vital sense of tradition—not in the sense of a past from which we draw final answers, but from which we draw insight, inspiration, and a heritage of highly useful resources to be used in nurturing the religious life of man.

The new liberalism is marked by a deep commitment to the church—but believes we need to do a great deal of re-thinking about the nature of the church and its ministry. The thinking of the church must be oriented to the present and future, rather than to the past.

On some such basis the new liberalism offers hope for helping man achieve his highest possibilities and his profoundest religious expression in the context of the real world.

* * * *

Inscribed on the walls of an English chapel are these words:

IN THE YEAR 1653
WHEN ALL THINGS SACRED
WERE THROUGHOUT THE NATION
EITHER DEMOLISHED OR
PROFANED, SIR ROBERT SHIRLEY
BARONET FOUNDED THIS
CHURCH: WHOSE SINGULAR
PRAISE IT IS TO HAVE DONE
THE BEST THINGS IN THE
WORST TIMES AND
HOPED THEM IN THE MOST
CALAMITOUS

Not only difficult times, but new times affect men in different ways. Some seek the security of the past—the fixed answer enshrined in authoritative book or creed.

Others seek to push ahead in the faith that revelations of the divine are unending, waiting on those who seek; that life carries within itself resources for the meeting of the emerging new, the challenge at hand. It is the latter the centuries recall with greatest appreciation.

These are exciting times in which to live—demanding and exciting. How tragic if while men are venturing forth

into new worlds of thought and experience showing forth the creative powers of the human spirit—religious leaders should offer nothing better than an emphasis upon man's incapacities, the unreality of progress, the non-redemptive character of history, the incapacity of reason to help us significantly in matters of theological concern.

So we return to the theme with which we began—"that religion will conquer which can render clear to popular understanding some eternal greatness incarnate in the passage of temporal fact." The greatness is all about us, for those who have eyes to see.