A BAROMETER OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY -- A REVIEW ARTICLE

Ed. L. Miller

In 1976 Moody Press published, under the editorship of Stanley N. Grundy and Alan F. Johnson, an attempt by several evangelical writers to provide a critical survey of the most important movements in contemporary theology, where "contemporary" means the 60's and since. It was called *Tensions in Contemporary Theology*. A second edition of the volume, identical with the earlier one except for the important addition of two chapters on liberation theology and some adjustments in the Preface, was issued in 1979, and a paperback version appeared in 1983, published by Baker Book House. That the essays have spoken effectively to the evangelicals themselves is apparent. Whether they can speak to anyone else is another matter. Nevertheless, there is a lot that can be learned about evangelicals from this volume; it serves as a sort of barometer which, in this instance, measures the present climate of evangelical thinking.

Following a Foreword by Roger Nicole, and two more or less introductory essays, "The Fortunes of Theology from Schleiermacher to Barth and Bultmann" (Bernard Ramm) and "Pacesetters for the Radical Theologians of the Sixties and Seventies" (Vernon Grounds), the essays center on religious language (Stanley Obitts), secular theology (Harold B. Kuhn), theology of hope (David P. Scaer) process theology (Norman N. Geisler), recent Roman Catholic theology (David F. Wells), liberation theology (Harvie M. Conn), and conclude with an evangelical apologetic, "The Conservative Option" (Harold O. J. Brown). Each essay is prefaced by an outline and concluded with footnotes and bibliography of selected readings. The essays are followed by name and subject indices.

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The scope of this survey, the useful overlapping of many of the discussions, the rich documentation, and the self-conscious espousal of a point of view, all commend the volume. What does *not* commend it is a great unevenness among the essays, both with respect to quality and accessibility.

Certainly the essays are marred here and there by misleading and mistaken claims. For example, any student of philosophy will be dumbfounded by Ramm's assertion that

> Kant's theses propounded in the *Critique of Pure Reason* were very similar to David Hume's and did much to discredit the apologetics of orthodox theology as well as the possibility of supernatural religion (p. 18).

This sounds very different from the truth of the matter: In spite of their radically *different* theses, both Kant and Hume came to similar conclusions which discredited, etc. Then, too, we encounter the terminological mess in his claim that

> in Sweden, England, and America philosophical influence in theology has come more from language philosophy, variously called logical positivism, logical empiricism, common-sense language, and language analysis (p. 37).

Presumably, what Ramm means is that logical positivism, logical empiricism, etc. are differing expressions or *forms* of language philosophy; they are hardly different labels for the same thing. It is misleading also to attribute to Bonhoeffer the phrase "anonymous Christians" (p. 38) as if Bonhoeffer believed that there are genuine Christians who do not actually name the name of Christ. And the claim that "although Barth denies universalism in word, universalism is the implication of his theology" (p. 39) is misleading, if not wrong. Barth was self-consciously ambivalent on universalism, freely acknowledging that God might save all.

In fact, Barth and neo-orthodoxy is perhaps the most recurring theme of these essays, not surprisingly in view of evangelicalism's love-hate relationship with Barth. The references are, often, of a negative and critical sort, and not always informed. An example of this is Scaer's continual carping about "the individual-centered, subjectivistic, and introverted

theology of neoorthodoxy" (p. 200) which, he alleges, stood in splendid isolation from social and political realities. Needless to say, such a characterization is incompatible with the well-known facts of Barth's own practical implementation of his theology. On a related front, Obitts represents Barth as teaching that "any awareness man has of God is through self-interpreting, self-authenticating, propositionally incommunicable divine self-disclosures" (p. 107). While it is true that Barth invites the charge of subjectivism, the sometimes inordinate zeal with which evangelicals have often seized the invitation is hardly justified. The suggestion of an uncontrolled and raging subjectivism cannot be reconciled with Barth's emphasis on the *objective* character of revelation and the centrality of preaching. It is not for nothing that Barth's has been called a theology of the Word; and it is not for nothing that the Barthian conception of the Word, which confronts the hearer from without and judges him, is exactly what gives rise to the objection from the *liberal* side that neo-orthodoxy is rigid, dogmatic, and exclusive. Again, when Geisler charges that some neo-orthodox theologians have "lost sight of God's revelation in nature" (p. 269), he seems to have forgotten the distinction between (1) the manifestation of God in his created world, which the neo-orthodox have, with the scriptures, certainly insisted on, and (2) natural theology, which some of them have, and again with scriptural justification, certainly denied.

Of a somewhat different sort is the factual mistake made by Scaer when he asserts that the Roman Catholic Church "has never repudiated that all earthly and spiritual powers have their source in the Roman Pontiff" (p. 228) -- which is precisely one of the things that *was* repudiated by Vatican II. And it strikes me as completely wrong to ascribe, as Geisler does, the bipolar model of God to Plato and to link him with Diogenes of Apollonia who, as Geisler asserts more or less correctly, "held that God is to the World as the soul is to the body" (p. 238). It is true

that Plato thought of the World-Soul standing in relation to the physical cosmos as the individual's soul stands to his body, but in the *Timaeus* (30B-C, 34B-36E) he expressly represents the Demiurge, or creator-God, not as being the World-Soul but as *creating* it along with the world's body. Also Brown's indictment of "form-matter dualism" as unbiblical inasmuch as it is "impersonal" and "ahistorical" (p. 448) involves a confusion between metaphorical and religious categories (as if one cannot espouse both a realist philosophy and a belief in the personal, historical perspective of the Bible), which would be apparent to anyone willing to pay more attention to St. Augustine than to Herman Dooyeweerd.

Then, too, while most of the essays in this volume are written in a straightforward, readable style, not all of them are. Obitts' discussion of religious language and Geisler's discussion of process theology are exceedingly dense and, for many readers of this volume, at many points surely incomprehensible. The problem is, of course, spawned by the nature of the issues, special vocabularies, and the attempt to cover too much and condense too much. The authors are not necessarily to be blamed for this, but still it is a bit unnerving to be hurled from the halcyon heights of one chapter into the stygian abyss of another.

None of this is to deny that a great deal can be learned from this volume both about recent theological strains and the way in which evangelicals deal with them. Naturally, different readers will find different values in these essays. For my part, I found Obitts' essay, "The Meaning and Use of Religious Language," in spite of its occasional opaqueness, to be an extremely instructive discussion of an extremely difficult and important topic (Obitts is professor of philosophy at Westmount College). After treating in a few pages the continental contribution, the rest of this long chapter traces the ins and outs of the English-speaking debate. The standard issues (e.g. verification, falsification, cognitive/non-cognitive meaning, "seeing as ___,"

and even possible worlds and the Ontological Argument) and the standard names (e.g. Ayer, Wisdom, Flew, Hare, Hick, Ferre, Wittgenstein) are all developed and intertwined with less obvious issues and lesser known contributors so as to leave no stone unturned and to put each stone in its proper place. One could easily return to this essay time and time again, and it alone would justify having this volume on the shelf.

Also worthy is Geisler's account of process theology (Geisler is professor of systematic theology at Dallas Theological Seminary). The first twenty pages of this chapter may be almost unintelligible to some readers due to the intrinsic difficulty of the subject and, more specifically, Whitehead's bizarre terminology. Geisler's account is probably as good as can be done, and though some will regard his critical treatment as a hammer-and-tongs approach, it is a most useful point-by-point criticism (especially of Pike's and Ogden's alleged antinomies of classical theism), and a criticism with which for the most part I happen to agree. On the other hand, I think Geisler is wrong in attributing timelessness to the Biblical portrayal of God, and in this he himself appears to be too controlled by Greek notions as with his Augustinian and atemporal interpretation of God's name, "I AM," at Ex. 3:14 (p. 272). Freely to grant the Bible's temporal conception of God is not, of course, incompatible with a philosophical view of God as timeless -- Geisler himself is very strong on the necessarily analogical character of religious language.

But it is, perhaps, Conn's two chapters on liberation theology that is the high-water mark of this volume. These well-conceived and well-written chapters, which total 109 pages, are tantamount to a monograph on what is without doubt the most pressing challenge not only to evangelical but any orthodox (including neo-orthodox) Christianity. Conn (who is associate professor of missions and apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary and whose insights reflect years of missionary service in Korea) provides the best that could be hoped for by the

editors of this volume, the first edition of which, as noted above, contained nothing on liberation theology. Conn's understanding of this movement and the spirit with which he deals with it represents evangelical writing at its best. The first of Conn's two chapters is sub-titled "An Overview." Here, excluding feminist theology since one cannot do everything, Conn provides a well-documented survey of Latin American and Black theologies -- Conn makes it abundantly clear that the plural is justified for both categories, so diversified are the approaches within each. In his second chapter, sub-titled "Toward a Common View," Conn evaluates the movement, always seeking to do justice to whatever merits this movement possesses. The uncritical critic of liberation theology could learn much from Conn's sensitive evaluation, though in the end many readers, such as myself, will find that his treatment reinforces their suspicion that liberation theology is, essentially, a socio-economic-political perspective that, notwithstanding its intrinsic importance at many points, has for its own purpose exploited the authentic Christian Gospel.

The last chapter, a sort of cap-stone discussion entitled "The Conservative Option," by Harold O. J. Brown (professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School), deserves also a special comment. It is at once a manifesto and apologetic for the evangelical position. It is also, at least for me, a let-down. The chapter gets off to a bad start with an emphasis on Biblical infallibility as a hallmark of evangelicalism, and we are reminded of this throughout. The Battle for the Bible, understanding the Bible as an infallible Word, is a battle that conservative Christianity is bound to lose, and the sooner this is recognized the better. As the issue stands, this is an unnecessary stumbling-block to evangelicalism which always asks, "Do you believe the Bible is infallible?", rather than the more urgent question, "Do you believe the Bible is *true*?" Further, and contrary to what Brown suggests, the only alternative to "the living God and...His inerrant Word" is *not* "an arbitrary intel-

lectual construct" (p. 459), and to attribute "willful distortion of the truth" (p. 452) to one's fellow truth-seekers is never a good idea. All in all, one approaching from the left of Brown can hardly be impressed either with his heavy-handed treatment of his non-evangelical opponents or the spirit with which he addresses them. And, in any event, not all of us non-evangelicals are naive about the presuppositions of secularism, or swept away by behaviorist determinism, or bent upon the rejection of Biblical truths.

More generally, one is continually reminded by Brown of the evangelicals' preoccupation with *apologetics*. But some of us doubt that there are Biblical warrants for bending over backwards to make Christianity rationally forceful and some of us believe that there is more than a little insight in Barth's quip that apologetics is theology that has lost its nerve (though we would distinguish, in this respect, Biblical from *philosophical* theology). Worse, there is something a little embarrassing about the way in which Brown seems to be straining for intellectual respectability and recognition for evangelicalism itself. To his statement, for example, that

> compared with rival views (such as liberal Protestantism, neo-orthodoxy, and the more recent views discussed in this volume) that also claim to be legitimate interpretations of the Bible's message, or of the Bible's "real intention," evangelical theology need feel no embarrassment about its intellectual respectability (pp. 437f.)

one is tempted to respond: "Methinks thou dost protest too much." Aside from the question whether such recognition is, from the Biblical standpoint, important or desirable (would it not be better for evangelicalism to make its case, be what it is, and let the rest of the theological world be damned?), evangelicalism--at least Brown's representation of it--will never be an option for those of us who, indeed, may believe in the authority of the Bible, the deity of Christ, his efficacious suffering, his bodily resurrection, and the reality of the coming reign of God, but who cannot believe those other things (such as the infallibility of the Bible, a literal six-day creation, an original

Pair, and a literal return of Christ on the clouds of heaven) which, in all honesty, should be displaced from the center of Christian belief. It may be added, in this respect, that while Brown stresses repeatedly evangelicalism's faithfulness to the "historic" faith, it is a very selective and self-assuring view of what is "historic."

While it is true, then, that from these essays one can learn much about both contemporary theology and about evangelicalism, the book is a very mixed bag. In the Preface, the editors state that the purpose of the book is to

> stimulate conservative theological students toward a more careful understanding of modern theology; its evangelical assessment; and the present current need for a positive, scholarly, world-related and evangelical theology (p. 11)

That intent may be realized. They also share Harold Lindell's hope:

> I would love to see a Luther, Calvin, Knox, or Edwards rise among you [evangelicals] to do for your age what some of the keenest minds I know did for mine (p. 12).

That hope probably will not be realized.