

# EDITORIAL

## A CONTEMPORARY 'FAILURE OF NERVE'

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In his *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, Gilbert Murray diagnosed the sickness of later Hellenism in terms of "a failure of nerve." This was an era which forsook the classical and the universal and turned to the narrowly private, the particularistic and the esoteric. As one surveys the conventional wisdom of today's avant garde theologians, he wonders whether a similar spiritual malaise may not be abroad in our land. A chorus of voices is rising to a crescendo, proclaiming that this—or—that doctrine of historic Christianity is no longer acceptable to Modern Man—that he simply will not have it! The dialectical theologians raised their voices against some forms of this sophism in the 'thirties. While today's scenario has changed, the mood of theological surrender against which, for instance, Edwin Lewis in *The Christian Manifesto* raised his protest remains.

Much effort is being expended in today's theological world to demonstrate the declaration that today's man will not accept an authoritative and normative Revelation. The argument runs: scriptural inerrancy died yesterday, and scriptural infallibility lies on its deathbed. Let us therefore hasten to find a basis for authority which will be acceptable to the mood of the "now generation" (especially of theologians) whose orientation is almost totally humanistic and existential.

Robert S. Alley has given expression to this mood of surrender in his volume *Revolt Against The Faithful*. While the subtitle of his work is "A Biblical Case For Inspiration As Encounter," Dr. Alley's approach is basically pragmatic and cultural, rather than biblical. Recognizing with John Macquarrie that "The belief that the Bible is infallible is one that dies hard in some parts of the Christian world" (p. 72), he sees as

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inevitable the demise within the Christian movement of the historic understanding of the role of Scripture as the Word of God. In place of this, he sees the inevitable ultimate acceptance of the literary—critical approach, which he equates with “revelation as encounter.”

Some will challenge the manner in which the Bible is made to speak the language of the critical-historical scholars. Others will challenge the theme of inevitability, in terms of which Dr. Alley presents his case. We believe he is vulnerable on both counts. Basic to his understanding of “revelation as encounter” is his definition of the term “Word of God.” This he sees as a sort of free-floating force operating in the world of the human spirit, similar to ‘Wisdom’ in the Book of Proverbs or the Wisdom of Solomon, or to the “spirit of God” (small-s) *passim* in the Old Testament and in the Apocrypha. It is this “Word of God” which is said to move within the hearts of men, including Jesus.

The key phrase in this approach is, that “the Bible itself is not the Word of God, but a witness to that Word.” In this form the teaching is not new, having been advanced by Emil Brunner a generation ago. To this view, the Bible can never be regarded as more than a record of a series of encounters (*Begegnungen*) between the free-floating Word and selected persons. Its value is strictly functional, serving to inspire similar encounters in the experience of those who read it. To this view, the entire theological-creedal structure of Christianity is ‘out’; nineteen centuries of Christian theological history are to be scrapped. At long last, the Church which has lain in the night of theological darkness is to be liberated through the method of “revelation as encounter,” and religious men and women are to be released from belief in a body of revealed Truth, to follow the deliverances of *their* encounters and *their* responses to an ‘enlightened’ reading of the Bible.

As to the inevitability of the ultimate triumph of the literary-critical approach, several questions may be asked. First, is it to be taken for granted that today’s anti-supernatural mood, with its rejection of the Virgin Birth, the biblical miracles and the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, will be normative for the future of religious interpretation? Second, even if it should prove to be true that Modern Man will hear nothing of a normative and authoritative Revelation, of the eternal Word incarnate in Jesus Christ, or of a resurrected Lord, does this justify the Christian theologian in trimming the sails of his proclamation to what the unregenerate mind of man will accept?

Did not the members of the apostolic body proclaim a Faith which cut squarely across the mood of the “modern men” of their time? Did

the scriptural writers ask what theological views would receive social support before they put them down in writing? Scarcely so. Had they been mere water-testers, the Church would have been stillborn. Perhaps it is time for theologians to ask themselves in good earnest, whether the relative impotence of the Church in our decade may be due, not to the inertia-drag of those who believe and proclaim a high view of biblical inspiration, but to the neglect in high places to proclaim a "Thus saith the Lord."

Some will agree with Dr. Alley, that such a proclamation denies Modern Man's demand to be free, and that it will bring those who hear under "the yoke of bondage" again. Granted that taking the Bible and the *credo* based upon it as normative does impose limitations upon "the free spirit of man." But perhaps it is in "captivity to Christ" that a generation adrift may find a more realistic view and experience of freedom.