

Editorial: SOME FACETS OF CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

In this issue of *The Asbury Seminarian* the editorial committee undertakes an audacious task. However, it is deemed a necessary task. The committee recalls that an earlier issue of this periodical which dealt with contemporary theological trends was much in demand. This time we are attempting a similar task. The hazard lies in the ease with which one may assume that his sampling is representative of the whole. One is reminded of the familiar parable of the three blind men examining the elephant. One felt the tail and said the animal was like a rope; another felt a leg and said the elephant was like a tree; a third touched the side and was convinced the elephant was like a wall. We have asked our contributors to do an almost impossible task—that of examining the whole from the vantage point of the part. The danger is that of omitting salient features and overemphasizing lesser matters. We beg our readers' indulgence in this effort, trusting that it will be accepted for what it is intended to be—a sincere effort to lend some perspective and evaluation to certain facets of contemporary theology.

TRENDS IN LITERATURE

One of the most effective ways of ascertaining trends and contemporary issues is to examine the literature of an era. This is particularly difficult when literature is so excessively proliferated. Never before in human history has reading matter been so abundant and seldom has it been taken more casually. The extent and variety of our reading material tends to make us careless about its use. The newer media of communication tend to make reading itself a little bit "old fashioned." Nonetheless, reading remains the most effective means of communication. A specialist in the field of literature contributes an article from the nation's crossroads. His competence in this very difficult field will be apparent to the readers of these pages.

In the current yearbook of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* an essayist reviewing the current production of literature concludes that little or no outstanding literature has been produced in recent months. Perhaps it is too much to expect really great literature to

appear every year or even in every decade. A glance at past centuries suggests that classic literature does not come with every generation. If one were to hazard an explanation for the current impoverishment of literary production it would be that the present generation—to a large extent—has been living on its inheritance rather than producing new and fruitful spiritual and intellectual discoveries. What is often regarded as new and vital theologically is an importation from Europe. Perhaps this country is still too much given to activism to be really creative in this area.

Not only is contemporary literature mediocre but there is little in it that is concerned with the doctrine of God. In a recent TV panel of authors and publishers it was noted that, unlike novels of the mid-nineteenth century, novels of today reflect uncertainty about the ultimate issues of life and death. There is even less certainty about the values of life, even to the difference between right and wrong; values and virtues are considered relative.

There are two facets, however, of contemporary literature which merit special mention. One is the recurring theme of sex. In the essay to which reference has already been made, contemporary writers, in a high percentage of cases, speak casually of sex mores as if extramarital sex were the norm. The contemporary interest in the subject is being exploited by some covertly, by others overtly. At a time when *Esquire Magazine* is discovering that life presents other interesting themes besides sex, *Playboy Magazine* professes to having discovered a new bonanza in this area. Its editor is a self-styled prophet of a "new morality," one in which age-old self-discipline is scorned. More meaningful than these is the attitude of the average reader to accept sex not only as a matter of course but as a welcome addition to his intellectual diet. The depraved appetite of the public and the greed of writers and publishers are greatly aided by court decisions, which coalescence has made the identification of pornographic literature virtually impossible. Perhaps the most disturbing phases of this is public indifference or tolerance of the unwholesome. In Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* the public preoccupation with "beauty queens" is satirized as a new form of idolatry, not unlike the fertility goddesses of pre-Christian cults.

Another facet of contemporary literature of special interest to theologically oriented persons is the concern with death. Recently a mid-western college student-sponsored forum chose death as its topic. Why was this? In most of the ages of mankind death has normally been a family community affair, and often a lingering one. The expression of sorrow was to be expected. In more recent times we have become accustomed to the spectacle of sudden death. An airplane crashes with four-score passengers aboard who perish instantly in flames. The death toll on American highways in one weekend may reach six hundred sudden deaths. As we read, defenders of freedom are exposing themselves to sudden death on the battlefields of Southeast Asia.

Modern man has succeeded in conquering most of the problems of his environment, of space and time, but has made little progress in his battle with death. The increasing number of suicides gives some evidence that many times death is welcomed as a way out. Others have treated death as an unnatural and unwelcome intruder into their routine of living. There are those who say that it comes as a friend. The traditional Christian view is that death is an enemy over which Christ alone has found victory. This is the teaching of the New Testament and one of the contributing factors in winning converts to Christianity in the early centuries of our era. Now "Christian" voices seem less confident about the next life and the passage to it than their forefathers. Has the scientific age blunted our spiritual sensitivity? Has the exploration of space tended to make the passage into the next life less meaningful? Without question the imagery connected therewith seems less plausible in an age preoccupied with science and the conquest of space. The effect of this upon Christian evangelism both public and private is obvious. It is probable that Jonathan Edwards' sermon entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" would be less gripping now than when it was delivered, if only because of our preoccupation with science and with astronauts who have thus far failed to locate heaven or hell. More significantly, they are not looking for such. For the Christian, however, the words of the Master are reassuring that God is not bound spatially but that He is to be found where He is worshipped in spirit and in truth.

THE "NEW MORALITY"

One of the worst effects of war is a downward revision of moral standards. Due to this, together with an increasing global society, many old inhibitions have vanished, both personal and community. The accessibility of contraceptive devices is a scientific contribution which can be either a blessing or a bane. To many it facilitates and perhaps justifies extramarital sex relations without the traditional penalties which have inhibited such practice through the ages. Virginity prior to marriage, prized so highly in most ancient societies and demanded by Christian ethics, is in the eyes of some a source of embarrassment. There has been, indeed, a sex revolution. The new freedom is hailed by many as a deliverance from the so-called prudery of "Victorianism." The tendency now is to dismiss as "Victorian" or "puritanical" the virtues of chastity and modesty, which have antecedents that go further back and deeper than the nineteenth century.

Today sex promiscuity is often labeled the "new morality." There is little in it that is new. Most of it is the old immorality. The newness of it lies more in the freedom from inhibition, in its relative freedom from censorship. To a large measure it marks simply a revival of pre-Christian paganism. It is the culture which vitiated the life of Greece and Rome. The Roman Empire did not fall so much

from pressures without as from disintegration within. The "new morality," therefore, is really a resurgence of the old immorality, the type which St. Paul and the early Christians condemned so vigorously and so effectively. The newest thing about it is that in some quarters it is viewed with tolerance or even sanctioned by those who profess adherence to Christ. The chaplain of a girls' college was quoted as saying in a sermon, "Sex before marriage may not be bad; it may be even redemptive." A bishop has gained international prominence by asserting that absolute standards and practices in this area should not be insisted upon.

It has been said of Paul's trilogy of virtues that faith and hope have been lost by the present generation and only love remains. In the light of the foregoing the question may be raised whether the so-called love that remains is *agape* or *eros*, divine love or romantic love. Is not the new morality seeking, sometimes with ecclesiastical sanction, to substitute *eros* for *agape* without discrimination? A case might be made out also that much of the impetus for the current crusade for the equality of man stems from the *fileō* or brotherly love as much or more than from *agapaō* or divine love. The basic root of this new morality, or rather, new immorality, often with ecclesiastical tolerance, is attributable to the new commitment to existentialism. Is it not, in part at least, the result of the new humanism which makes the individual the center and end of existence? Everyone, then, can do that which is right in his own eyes. There is no absolute standard of right and wrong. Each one makes up his own standard. Ethics is relative, as Sartre, Camus, and the logical positivists insist. One may wonder whether those who call this "new" morality have ever read Heraclitus (500 B.C.) and his successors who have constantly inveighed against absolutes. From the perspective of history, and from the posture of faith, one may affirm his conviction that the new morality may be scoring some temporary victories but in the end will be put in its place by the sternness of the universal moral law which has never yet been repealed.

There are also encouraging aspects of the new morality. The social conscience seems more sensitive than formerly. A concern for one's neighbor seems more prevalent now than in most other times in human history. The strong are more willing to bear the infirmities of the weak. Initiated in most cases by the Christian conscience working like leaven in secular society, social concern is expressing itself to an unprecedented degree in social security, medicare, and concern for the indigent and infirm. This is seen on an international scale as well since the "strong" nations are willing to bear the infirmities of the "weak," and to foster their natural aspirations for freedom and equality. Leaders in this are those nations most influenced by the Bible, namely, the United States and the United Kingdom. Communist nations have been forced in many cases to follow the same strategy in order to win friends and influence peoples.

Another facet of this is seen in the recent modification of our immigration quotas to a policy of admitting people according to personal merit rather than according to country of origin. This reflects a new emphasis toward the individual as a person rather than merely a member of an ethnic unit. Most of us prefer to be judged as individuals, as persons, rather than as a member of a group.

The most striking manifestation of the recognition of individual worth is the social revolution in the civil rights movement. Here the morale emphasis in support of voter registration, equality in education, opportunities for employment, equitable housing, and equal access to public accommodations, is "over the hump" so far as general acceptance in this country is concerned. The fact that it has been so long delayed, that Christians have too often been complacent about the situation, and that it has been won at such a cost to minorities, should be a source of embarrassment to every American citizen. That it is finally coming is assured.

Civil rights leaders now face the temptation of success, often a tougher test of character than adversity. Will the civil rights movement discipline itself in its demands? Will it be more concerned with the total social welfare than are some monopolistic labor unions and their leaders? Will charismatic leaders like Dr. King be content to consolidate gains and patiently work out the details or will they feel compelled to keep themselves in the headlines by moving from one crisis to another? Will integration remain token or real? White moderates have a major responsibility to see that it does; they will decide whether segregation will become truly voluntary or remain involuntary. The tendency of civil rights advocates to pontificate about the United States' involvement in world affairs creates apprehension as to the judgment and moderation of some civil rights leaders.

A NEW LANGUAGE

From modern "would-be" prophets comes a recurring emphasis that the older traditional expressions of faith are meaningless to modern men. This is at most only a half truth. It is true that every age has its characteristic idiom and the Gospel should be phrased to articulate the thought forms of the current age. A good precedent of this is set by the writers of the Bible. The prophets and apostles went out of their way to find language that would give their message the maximum impact upon their contemporaries. This needs to be done today as in every generation. Often, however, rebels against theological language do not seem to be reaching the public even after "demythologizing" the New Testament or allegorizing the Old. One gets the impression that the proponents of discarding the old terminology need not so much to get new words to match contemporary experience as to experience the reality conveyed by the biblical terminology. The thing missing in most cases is not the right label but the lack of content. If a person becomes a "new creature in

Christ," people will still sit up and take notice when he reports what has happened to him, regardless of his language. People are still hungry and thirsty for spiritual vitality, for biblical and existential realism.

The need for new language is only half of the truth. The other half is that to speak in pictorial terms is inevitable, even in our sophisticated age of science. We never will get to the place where we can speak to the popular mind in purely conceptual language. For example, we speak of "sunrise" and "sunset" as if to imply that the sun was revolving around the earth. Why do we not say the sun appears and disappears? Because this descriptive, picturesque language is used does anyone think that the users of it are Ptolemaic in their cosmology? News media speak of gathering the news "from the four corners of the earth" as if to imply that the earth is flat and square. Is this confusing to modern man? Do users of this nomenclature believe that the earth is flat? We speak of "sailing" in "steamships" which are diesel-powered. To use the allegedly antiquated terminology of the Bible may be less a hindrance when speaking to spiritual illiterates than is commonly supposed. It is significant that the apostles of a new religious nomenclature seem to get a less popular hearing than those who still speak to their contemporaries in biblical terms. Even to sophisticated moderns it seems quite likely that the "cleansing of the heart" is as meaningful as "rectification of the will." What is needed therefore, is not so much to translate biblical terms into scientific contemporary equivalents as it is for the expounder of the Scriptures to experience what its writers experienced of God through Christ.

EXISTENTIALISM

From an historical standpoint modern existentialism represents a change from philosophies of essence to those of existence, from philosophies of conceptualism to those of pragmatism, from being to becoming, from concept to decision. The older philosophy could say with Descartes, "I think, therefore I am." The newer existentialism believes "I am, therefore I think." It is hereby suggested that many of the proponents of existentialism are in reality twentieth century Gnostics. They are exponents of a philosophical rather than of a biblical theology. While ostensibly they place knowledge in a secondary position, actually they rate sophistry higher than faith. The Gnostics of the second century of our era prided themselves on being more sophisticated than ordinary Christians. They lived on knowledge while others lived on faith. They were not content with the traditional language and forms of the Christian faith but were eager to boldly explore and appropriate contemporary intellectual trends and incorporate them into their Christian profession. A library of some of these Gnostics has recently been uncovered in the sands of Egypt, after having been preserved there during the centuries. When writing to the Colossians and the Corinthians, Paul warned them

against such an incipient gnosticism. John was aware of it when he wrote his first epistle. The early Christians were not against knowledge as such. But they were suspicious of those who considered knowledge more important than faith, hope, and love. Perhaps the best representative of this contemporary gnosticism is the late Paul Tillich. The similarities between his philosophical theology and the speculations of the early Gnostics is rather striking.

The avowed purpose of the modern existentialists is commendable, namely, to break from meaningless antiquated thought forms to idioms meaningful to their contemporaries. Is there any evidence that they have succeeded in what is their avowed and commendable purpose? Have they not rather substituted for the Christ of faith a Christ who exists only in the cogitations of those who are reluctant to discard the Christian tradition but yet present little more than a synthetic "Christ" of gnostic speculations. Many modern existentialists, like the ancient Gnostics, present a "Christ" who does not so much save from sin as deliver from ignorance and matter. What will be the future of pulpits filled with seminarians trained in schools committed to the existentialism of a pseudo-theology? The virtues and vices of today's "creative thinkers" will be a blessing or bane to church goers for the next generation. The pulpit is usually a decade behind the lecture. Many books are out of date by the time they are in print.

SO GOD IS DEAD!

The avowed disciples of some existentialist theologians are now willing to take the step which their spiritual fathers hesitated to do. Some of them are blithely announcing that God is already "dead." One of the more prominent apostles of this movement is a professor in a theological school; another is on the faculty of a church-related university. When the Psalmist heard that someone announced the death of God he called him a "fool." When Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God he was regarded by Christians as a blatant pagan. One of his most influential disciples was Adolph Hitler. Nietzsche repudiated not only Christian theology but Christian ethics. He scorned the Christian principle that "the meek shall inherit the earth." He was contemptuous of the Christian ethic that the "strong should bear the infirmities of the weak." Rather, he called for the elimination of the weak and the supremacy of the superman. Hitler put Nietzsche's theory into practice. Now we behold the spectacle of this philosophy being supported by funds consecrated to the Christian church, speaking with quasi-ecclesiastical authority. In the tradition of Nietzsche an avowed disciple of Tillich, Altizer of Atlanta, is quoted as saying, "Only when God himself has died in his original and primordial form can he be truly known as the source of alienation and repression." He adds, "The death of God makes possible wholly new forms of faith; the new humanity which they proclaim . . . calls for the reversal of all moral law and the

collapse of all historical religion" (*Christian Advocate*, Dec. 16, 1965, p. 22). It is significant here to note that, according to one of the more uninhibited and articulate disciples of this movement, not only theology but ethics is involved. History, if not the Bible, should teach responsible and thoughtful persons that theistic belief and ethics are usually linked, and it is very significant that a call to recognize the death of God is accompanied by a call also to renounce the lessons of history and even a reversal of moral law. Those who respond to this challenge find themselves in spiritual and moral chaos. It is a nihilism, perhaps even more candid than even that of Nietzsche himself. Is this really, as it professes to be, the consequence of the existentialism of the twentieth century's most influential theologian?

IN SUMMARY

On the whole, contemporary moral and theological trends, as seen editorially, are far from reassuring. Least reassuring is the frequency with which religious leaders are saying that there are no absolute standards of right and wrong. Bishop J.A.T. Robinson is saying (*Christian Morals Today*) that no rule is invariably mandatory, that morals are relative to the situation of the participants. Such an attitude can only lead eventually to moral chaos, in which every man does what "is right in his own eyes." After concluding that the Bible contains numerous errors, many hold that even its most basic principles are no longer authoritative or relevant.

Douglas Rhymes (*No New Morality*) likewise has no final answer about what is right or wrong in any given situation. Instead of having a moral law to govern conduct in a given situation, he not only leaves it up to the individual in the situation but gives no fixed guideposts for judgment in that situation. Such is the heritage of two generations of Freudian psychoanalysis and the subjective "ethics" of existentialism.

Midway between an objective moral standard and the existential subjective attitude is a variation of the latter, called situation or contextual ethics. In Joseph Fletcher (*Situation Ethics*) the position is taken which admits absoluteness only in the category of *love*. This, he argues, may justify extramarital sex *in certain situations*. Much is made of the principle of the lesser of two evils even when other alternatives are available.

While Jesus made love and law inseparable—"if ye love me keep my commandments" (John 14:15)—modern "prophets" preach a "love without law." This is antinomianism (cf. II Peter 2:1-10).

Against this the Word of God shines as light in moral darkness and chaos. Believers are still a minority and need to discover and affirm the eternal truth found in the Scriptures, as verified by life, "for such a time as this." Jeremiah was asked the question "Is there any word from the Lord?" by King Zedekiah at a time of

national crisis. Some are asking this question rather wistfully today. We can confidently affirm that there is! The answer comes, in large measure, from another passage in Jeremiah, "Stand ye in the ways and see. Ask for the old paths wherein is a good way, and walk therein and ye shall find rest to your souls." Those who dare to accept Jesus' challenge and come to Him will find this rest still available today (Jer. 6:16; Matt. 11:28-30).

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