

# The Challenge of the Dialectical Theology To Modern Educational Theory

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It is always necessary in dealing with the Dialectical Theology, or the Theology of Crisis, to remember that the movement is an amorphous thing. It emerged during the period immediately following the first World War; its thought underwent considerable change on the Continent in the post-war period, and experienced a radical transformation as it grew as a transplanted movement in the United States.

It is agreed that this type of theology sprang, in large part, from the thought and writings of Søren Kierkegaard. The Crisis Theologians have revived and given a theological interpretation to his writings, feeling that they accurately diagnose the case of 20th century Europe. Just as the thought of Kierkegaard refused to be channelled, so also the Dialectical Theology has assumed several shapes, characteristic among which is that issuing from its pessimistic European form as it has been transmuted in America into a passion for social reform.

Barth furnishes in the Preface to his second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* what may be considered a common denominator for the Crisis Theology.

. . . if I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard calls the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: 'God is in heaven, and thou art on earth'. The relation between such a God and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God, is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

The Dialectical Theology is likewise deeply indebted to the Existential School in philosophy, which is a deriv-

ative of the tradition of Kierkegaard, in which Heidegger and others modified the great Dane's individualism by an emphasis upon man's total existential situation as he is associated with nature, things, animals, and his fellow men.<sup>2</sup> The social interest which characterized most of the thinkers of the movement under consideration is probably a derivative of the Existential School. Barth has, however, reacted against some of the tendencies in the thought of Heidegger which seem to the latter to minimize the sense of tragedy which the life situation seems to lay upon the thoughtful man. It is not pertinent to the proposition of this paper to further develop the system of the Dialectical Theologians, but rather to inquire how this system, particularly as it is embraced in the United States does logically, as well as practically, bear upon contemporary theory of education. It is necessary once more to state the *caveat* issued earlier—that the Crisis Theology is a mercurial thing, difficult to pick up in the hand; and hence conclusions concerning it must be drawn with care.

It is the aim of this article to seek to discover the manner in which the Dialectical Theology constitutes a challenge to present-day theory of education, from the standpoint (1) of its metaphysics; (2) of its anthropology; and (3) of its ethics.

## I

In general, the thinkers under consideration (especially Karl Barth, H. Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Edward Geismar, and Wilhelm Pauck) tend to discount philosophy, at least insofar as it attempts to furnish answers to ultimate questions. To

the question, "Is a philosophy of religion, strictly speaking, possible?" the answer of these men would generally be in the negative. Yet the system does make certain generalizations concerning the nature of the universe.

The first and most important of these is that the universe embodies certain radical and enduring contradictions. The enduring antitheses which are held to run throughout the theological situation, namely the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between eternity and time, and between God and man—these have definite metaphysical overtones. While modern thought has attempted to understand eternity in terms of time, and God in terms of man, these thinkers deny that the relationships existing in the case of these two pairs can properly be described in terms of either continuity or contiguity. This necessarily involves things as they essentially are, and indicates that the system in question has a metaphysics, which is characterized by Barth's disjunctive conceptions.

The anti-intellectual strain in the Crisis Theology may be traced to two factors: the reaction of Barth against the scholastic method of Heidegger; and the reaction of Kierkegaard (the intellectual forbear of both Heidegger and Barth) to the facile rationalism of Hegel. It must not be supposed, however, that the dialectical Theology was wholly an inherited thing. It grew up, rather, out of situations similar to that from which Kierkegaard's thought came. Even the melancholy Dane felt in his environment the element of contradiction which seems to be inherent in all of human existence.

Karl Barth, like Kierkegaard, saw within the historical situation (as well as within himself) that which forbid the completion of the rationalistic triangle in Hegelian fashion. Instead of an optimistic and triumphant synthesis, he found the universe to justify only a frame of mind which must "stop short and content itself with the whole-

ness which is divined but not perceived in a balanced pair of opposites."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps enough has been said to indicate the nature of the metaphysics of the system under question. The contradictions in which human experience finds itself constantly involved are derived from the nature of our world. The universe is rent open; ". . . nature itself is disturbed and thrown into confusion by that which is unnatural, by the contradiction which comes from the mind and spirit of men."<sup>4</sup> The implications of this last quotation for theology need not detain us here; Brunner is reacting against the facile monistic view of the universe, both in respect to its development and to its present nature.

The emphasis of the thinkers under study is, however, not primarily upon the universe itself, but upon the universe *qua* understood by man. It is at this point that its impact is exerted upon modern education. First and most obvious of the effects of such a system would be its caution against dogmatic finality in the study of the sciences, and particularly of the science of man. The crisis theologians themselves incline to accept the developmental view of man; at the same time they allow that we today know far less about man than our predecessors thought they knew.

The dualism of the movement, derived from the Barthian insistence upon the radical disconnection between the supernatural and the natural thus serves to caution modern education against assuming that the universe is a neat package, waiting to be untied, and to reveal to the casual student its inner secrets.

The situation of man is held to be, not an epiphenomenon, but a genuine index to the real nature of the world. It must be borne in mind that only very recently is America coming to approximate the European scene. But now emotional strains are appearing; we are at the threshold of learning the meaning of suffering. Our predic-

ament is bringing into acute form the realization that something is radically wrong. The universe, so recently appearing willing to eat out of our hands (being rapidly subjected to scientific control) suddenly eludes our grasp. The concept of necessary progress, as a principle underlying the universe, seems no longer capable of defense. Instead of gaily riding the crest of the "wave of the future," we find that we may not, after all, live in that kind of a world.

Educational theory is not escaping the impact of this realization, which was seen more or less clearly a decade ago by the crisis theologians. They felt that they could read the trend of things, from the clue which the universe revealed, —that of radical and enduring disjunction written deep into the nature of things. We seem to have misread our world; if so, we are no more blameworthy than our educators, who have followed Condorcet, Comte and Spencer in believing that man, after reviewing his past, would in time "remove all inequalities and perfect human nature."

The perfectibility of human nature, and belief in necessary and continued progress, have been twin dogmas, with clear metaphysical bases. Since 1900, these concepts have shaped educational theory; only recently have they been questioned. The dialectical theologians have served as gad-flies, stinging the educational world awake by questioning these assumptions. They have pointed out that change is not equal to progress, and that material development may be a false barometer of genuine and substantial human advancement.<sup>5</sup>

It must not be supposed that the thinkers in question are social coroners or that they categorically deny the possibility of progress. They acknowledge thankfully the sociological and legal gains that have been achieved, such as the generally-accepted "freedoms," the equality of opportunity, and the increased measure of

social and economic security available under democratic society. They protest, however, any view of life which makes temporal progress an ultimate, or which insists that the universe is so geared that progress is inevitable.

Thus, they challenge educators to question their goals, and to examine that which they considered worthy of whole-hearted pursuit. In protest against a mere science-ism, they insist that the universe must be understood in terms of a hidden dimension, God as *transcendent-immanent*. The application of such a view challenges the naturalism and the anthropocentric character of modern education, imploring it to search whether it may not have, after all, erred in assuming with Rousseau that nature and human nature are essentially good, and "that the first movements of nature are always right." For if these latter sentiments be true, then education without reference to a Deity is to be preferred, since things are not to be judged in terms of Him anyway. The attempt to interpret all of reality in theistic terms cannot but clash with such an educational theory as that of Dewey, who denies the existence of transcendental categories by reference to which things are to be understood, and who finds all of the canons of understanding to emerge from the on-going of all organic activities.<sup>6</sup>

This does not mean that the crisis theologians deny that historical and cultural relativisms exist; it does mean that in this type of thought they are not considered to be ultimate—that they are transcended in the categories of *God* and *eternity*, and that the maximum of possible human comprehension of these relativisms comes by viewing them "from above," that is, viewing them from the point of view "of a God who transcends, yet is immanent in the historical process.

From the foregoing it appears that the Crisis Theology is more effective, through its metaphysical assumptions,

to expose the presuppositions of modern educational theory, than to offer a clearly-defined solution. It is fairly clear at present that they have pointed the way to a diagnosis of our ills, and that they are correct in supposing that our educational system must bear its fair share of responsibility for the fact that our age has lost its way. Whether the proposed metaphysics of the system is justifiable, and whether it has to date been sufficiently well defined to render it workable is a separate question.

## II.

Starting ostensibly as a new departure in theology, the Theology of Crisis became rapidly metamorphosed into an anthropology. This may perhaps have come through its genesis, under circumstances of disillusionment and despair in Europe, and in the fine foresight which some of its thinkers exercised in America, even in the rosy days of the late 'twenties.<sup>8</sup> It must be said in favor of such men as Reinhold Niebuhr that they were quick to detect moral unsoundness beneath surface-prosperity. It is further to their credit, that whereas today they might sit back in triumphant detachment, and say "we told you so," yet they do not do so, but are inclined to share the responsibility for a world aflame.

But to return to the subject in hand, after this brief parenthesis: it cannot be denied that with its ostensible emphasis upon God and upon eternity, the Crisis Theology never allows the human problem to move out of sight. Though it proposes to correct the Humanism of this century, it does not seek to do so by devoting little attention to the human problem. Rather, it endeavors to view man "from above," and to understand him in terms of God, not the contrary.

One of the basic protests leveled by the dialectical theologians against modern education is that its theory is oriented in humanism—a humanism of an especially vicious type. As a result of the emergence, in the nineteenth

century, of the science of sociology, modern education has pursued paths which have led to the loss of the individual. Such a statement presupposes a definition of the term 'individual' in terms other than that of numerical distinctness. In naturalistic theories, the individual is lost in the emphasis upon the interpretations of consciousness, and in which philosophical approaches to self-consciousness are lost in naturalistic explanations.<sup>9</sup>

In idealism, proper individuality is lost, not in a failure to perceive the depths of the dimensions of the human spirit, but in the identification of "the self-transcendent ego with universal spirit."<sup>10</sup> Thus, whatever the rational universal, whether the Absolute Mind, or the State, a proper view of the self is lost. In Romanticism, the individual is held to fare no better; for in this attempt at the championing of the rights of the self, the self is in reality either subordinated to the collective group through his relations to the realm of nature or else he becomes himself a god, with no law save his own will-to-power.

The thinkers under study would save the individual-self from his fate in modern thought (whatever direction this may have taken since the Renaissance) by appealing to him, in the name of Christianity, as an isolated individual. Whatever may be the social ideology of such men as Brunner and Niebuhr, they regard a proper view of the individual unit as basic to a free society. At this point, the movement challenges modern education at the point of naturalism. By interpreting the goal of life in terms of adaptation to biological and other existing conditions, education trains men for the life-in-the-hand—for a utilitarian civilization.

Curiously enough, the same writers challenge some of the individualistic assumptions of the modern theory of education. While some educators criticize American thinking (and indirectly American education) for its lack of

a keen social consciousness by reason of the individualism that is natural to most of our people, Niebuhr criticizes our educational theory for its over-individualism.<sup>11</sup> The solution to the human problem is sought through the increase of man's individual ability. Thus, viewed in one way, modern education is still "bourgeois" — it still thinks in terms of *laissez faire*. Such a program develops self-assertion without any compensatory preparation for living in the social group. The consequent transcendence of his physical and natural limitations renders him arrogant in the belief that he is "captain of his soul"—with the tendency toward the intensification of the human social problem, due to the increase of his power over his fellows.

It is no longer possible to postpone the question of reconciling these two apparently contradictory protests: the one objection that modern education has tended to lose the individual in the social group; and the second, that the role of individual has been falsely exaggerated in modern education. The difficulty is resolved when we note that what the crisis theologians are protesting is the inadequacy of the modern educators' view of the individual. It has been said (*supra*) that individuality is more than mere numerical distinctness: it lies in the fact, stated by Brunner thus:

Man has been created in and for the word of God, and this makes him the being who is responsible. This fact unmistakably determines man as an individual. Responsibility is that which sets the individual as individual apart and makes him independent. . . . To the extent in which the Christian faith intensifies the content and the value of responsibility, as compared with the ordinary idea of responsibility, the content and the value of individual existence is also intensified.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, this thinker sees in the "modern" view of individuality a lack of dimension. Man is viewed within a merely humanistic frame of reference, and without regard to his accountability to a transcendent Creator, to Whose freedom he is subordinate.<sup>13</sup>

Insofar as modern education has lost its emphasis upon a Christian view of individuality, and its "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" it has no adequate basis for a philosophy of education which shall train men to function in a democratic society as one who adjusts his rights to the rights and needs of others. This problem will appear again in the next section of this article dealing with the criticism which these thinkers level at modern educational theory upon the basis of the ethical presuppositions of the Dialectical Theology.

The next important objection which these thinkers raise to modern education is its assumption that the solution to the human problem can be found in the development of intelligence. Niebuhr feels that educators are still unduly under the spell of the Socratic dictum that "Virtue is knowledge, and can be taught," and that, beginning with the Renaissance, modernity has been mistaken in imagining that man is to be conceived primarily in terms of the uniqueness of his rational faculties. Thus, educators seek (and expect) the solution of men's ills in the improvement of his rational faculties.

The distrust of reason which characterizes the Crisis Theology has been feared by many who "saw red" before they seriously considered the writers' meanings. It is impossible to escape the impression that Reinhold Niebuhr has at times been condemned without fair trial. What he seems to mean is this: Education can, by cultivating reason, solve many problems. But man is a finite creature, and hence incapable of taking in "the needs of others as vividly as he recognizes his own, or to be as quick in his aid to remote as to immediately revealed necessities." Thus, reason is limited by the range of man's possible perspective, and, as well, by its ability to set for conduct "goals more inclusive, and socially more acceptable, than those which natural impulse prompts."<sup>14</sup>

Education, then, fails to take due ac-

count of the factor of finiteness in its cultivation of reason—either finiteness in respect to its temporal and spatial perspectives, or in respect to actualizing the goals which it discerns, “nor even of adequately defining, the unconditioned good which it dimly apprehends as the bound and goal of all its contingent values.”<sup>15</sup>

In all this, modern education has not only failed to recognize the limitations of the culture of reason and the enlargement of intelligence; it has likewise failed to render reason the master of impulse. Rather, it frequently becomes, through some types of psychology (which shape to a large extent modern education), an instrument which justifies the actions of unrestrained impulse, and to open avenues for its ungoverned activity. Such a challenge would be directed with most point toward the psychology of Freud, in which reason is reduced to a place second to impulse.

Thought and reason are anything but dominant forces in man's nature; they exist only to serve the great primal urges and desires that are the real masters of human conduct. The intellect is their servant, and a corruptible servant, not above twisting and concealing and manipulating the truth in the interest of its powerful masters. Always reason is motivated by affective needs; it exists to do their bidding; directly or indirectly it works to procure their satisfactions. . . . Even the most logical and realistic thought is determined by personal and primitive desire.<sup>16</sup>

Against such a contention, Niebuhr would probably say that such an abuse of reason was a derivative of an exaggerated trust of reason, not balanced by a proper consideration of the role of the emotions, nor accompanied by a proper discipline of the impulsive side of nature. His criticism would again take the form of an indictment of the overly-intellectual emphasis in education, and of its failure to properly estimate the organic unity of man's personality—the inter-relatedness of his intellectual and appetitive powers.

Enough has been said to indicate that the Crisis Theology, in its anthro-

pology, challenges modern educational theory at (especially) two points: (1) it contends that there has been lost the transcendental frame of reference within which alone a proper individualism may be conserved in harmony with the requirements of a democratic society; and (2) it contends that its intellectualism has lost sight of the organic character of human personality, and hence has failed to cultivate reason for her proper function.

### III.

The emphasis of the Dialectical Theology upon such factors as *crisis* and *judgment* comes as a wholesome corrective to the easy optimism which has underlain much of the educational theory of today.<sup>17</sup> The ethical views of Niebuhr and Brunner deserve some more detailed analysis in an article of this type, inasmuch as they involve a type of world-outlook which has a considerable degree of plausibility in times like these.

Brunner's ethical theory centers in his view of the “Orders” and of the “Imperative,” between which this writer divides the field of human endeavor. In the *Orders*, Brunner finds both a divine institution and a human fitness for living within their mandates. They are *given* to the individual, they make life livable to him, and it is his duty to either affirm them or to contribute to their modification by actively infusing them with Christian principles.<sup>18</sup>

These Orders represent the will of God in a secondary and imperfect form, and are five in number:

1. The family
2. The economic system
3. The state
4. The cultural pattern
5. The Church.

Membership in the Orders affords an opportunity for the expression of the ‘life of love’; in those instances in which there is a discrepancy between the actual society and the ideal of Christian society,

. . . the individual is justified in acting upon

his personal calling by the fact that God has called, and that He will overrule finite misjudgments and pardon errors committed in the face of the paradoxical situations commonly called 'conflicting duties.'

Brunner's view of the *Imperative* represents a criticism of both naturalistic and rationalistic ethics, and points to another and transcendental source for ethics — that is, God as moral revealer.<sup>19</sup> Such an ethic may be expected to conflict at times with man's 'natural' desires, and with his reason as well. Hence, it addresses itself to man's *faith*.

The fidelistic character of Brunner's ethics is modified somewhat in the moral philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr. Unlike Brunner, he insists that the law of love is relevant to social problems on a wider scale than the mere person-to-person and face-to-face level. Niebuhr sees the "natural man" as obligated to "emulate the love of God, to forgive as God forgives, to love his enemies as God loves them."<sup>20</sup> Thus the 'love ideal', while impossible of full realization under existing conditions of human society, is still relevant to the whole of human life: the pursuit of this ideal *does* raise the general level of human life.

Although this view is criticized from some quarters as either a contemplation of a beautiful ideal, or as a justification for the existence of the margin between the real and the ideal, it is not without its point. It serves, first of all, to call attention to the tremendous complexity of the human social problem, and the inadequacy of mere "social intelligence" as an antidote to our evils. A derivative of this is the realization that an industrialized society, with absentee ownership, and remote control of the processes of production, generate social problems incapable of ready solution.<sup>21</sup>

This challenges education to an ethical approach which renders ethical relativities as non-ultimate. It insists upon fixed *principles* in ethics, as given by a transcendental Lawgiver, in

relation to which *precepts* must be determined, often times, upon something analogous to the Catholic view of a hierarchy of values.

Closely allied with this is the insistence by the crisis theologians upon an interpretation of man's ethical nature in terms of its blackness. Instead of acquiescing in the view that man's character is merely gray in spots, these thinkers insist that sin has reached the center of the human personality, and has produced reverberations in his moral life which call for something more than a mere *e-duco*, a calling-forth of self-expression. Practically, this involves a challenge to a redefinition of the *aims* of education, in terms of a Christo-centric basis for moral instruction. This issues in a renewed call for emphasis upon *content*, instead of mere method.<sup>22</sup>

Related to this is the criticism offered by the thinkers under study against modern education's attempt to locate the heart of the Christian message in its ethical emphasis. In other words, Christians are not made by a facile *imitatio Christi*, conceived in terms of a general criterion for the reconstruction of the life of the group. Christian ethical living is rather, say the theologians of the Crisis school, the fruition of the "encounter" of the individual with his God.<sup>23</sup>

This brings the consideration of the challenge of the system under study to modern education back to the question mentioned earlier, namely that of the status of the individual in a sound philosophy of education. If the locus of the moral problem be the individual, then education is on the wrong track in its stress upon mere methodology conceived in terms of "socially useful projects." Instead of elaborate committee discussion and ideological programs, (which have come into disrepute since the Munich Pact), these thinkers insist that the realities of the situation require a vigorous application of the sanctions flowing from the Orders. While this distrust of the



value of reasoned exploration of man's ethical ills (which is a form of education) may go too far, it serves at any rate to underscore the whole protest of the dialectical theologians against a bland acceptance of the Socratic dictum in the moral instruction of man. It serves to show the depth of the moral problem, and seeks to emphasize the necessity of a radical (and religious) cure for man's moral obliquity.

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From the foregoing considerations, it seems clear that the *Theology of Crisis* serves as an irritant to contemporary educational theory. To function thus, it does not necessarily offer an adequate alternative: in point of fact, it seems to the writer to fail to do so. As a corrective, it challenges certain bland presuppositions which modern educational philosophy has held, in the spirit of optimism which characterized the 'twenties', a rosy view of man long after the realities of the world scene ceased to justify such optimism.

However nebulous some of the solutions of these thinkers may seem, the thinkers themselves have been penetrating in their analysis of our most pressing ills, and have fearlessly applied canons of criticism which rendered them unpopular in the extreme. One element in this challenge seems to tower above the rest: the charge that

in all of the modern emphasis upon the 'worth of the individual', that true individuality (as distinguished from mere particularity) is in constant peril of being lost. As an antidote to this, the crisis theologians insist upon the theistic postulate as an essential frame of reference within which the *self* may be preserved. The God-reference becomes not only the cornerstone of a true metaphysics; it as well the necessary fixed star, in line with which a true anthropology and a valid ethical theory can be maintained.

There are indications that this protest has not gone unheeded. While such thinkers as Harrison S. Elliott have protested the proposed solutions of Brunner and Niebuhr, they yet recognize the validity of the criticisms which these men have levelled against modern educational philosophy.<sup>24</sup> Again, the appearance of a book entitled *Christ and Christian Education* (instead of religious education) by an author who would probably have scoffed at his present title twenty years ago, indicates that the protest is not being wasted.

Thus, the system is a disturber of a false peace; its voice comes to us reinforced by the realities of the time, and calls us to an education "that hath foundations," and summons us to re-think our world-view, in terms of the statement that "its builder and maker is God."

#### REFERENCES

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<sup>3</sup>Lowrie, Walter, OUR CONCERN WITH THE THEOLOGY OF CRISIS (Boston, 1932), p. 50.

<sup>4</sup>Brunner, H. Emil, MAN IN REVOLT (London, 2nd impression, 1942). p. 56.

<sup>5</sup>Niebuhr, NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN, Vol. I, (New York, 1943). pp. 68ff.

<sup>6</sup>Dewey, John, LOGIC: THE THEORY OF

INQUIRY (New York, 1938), pp. 16ff.

<sup>7</sup>Niebuhr, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 36.. Cf. p. 301.

<sup>8</sup>Niebuhr, Reinhold, BEYOND TRAGEDY (New York, 1937), p. 29.

<sup>9</sup>Niebuhr, NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN, Vol. 1, pp. 69ff.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>11</sup>Niebuhr, Reinhold, MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY (New York, 1932), pp. 28f.

<sup>12</sup>Brunner, op. cit., p. 279.

<sup>13</sup>Niebuhr, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 92.

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