Wanted: A Place to Stand

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The timeless quest of man for a place from which he may view the world in depth survives all disparagement of metaphysics and all despair at the point of the attainment of absolute knowledge. The mind persists in its goetic survey of the terrain of possible thought, seeking portions of its mass upon which it may plant its feet, and from which it may comprehend the panorama below. That which Kant called Weltbegriff is as ancient as man; for the quest for a perspective from which total human experience may be brought into a systematic unity is evident as far back as the chronicle of man can be traced. Most men are convinced, furthermore, that there is some objective vantage point for thought, which puts the thinker beyond a mere reliance upon subjective regulative ideas.

Nor has there been a dearth of competitors for the place of high ground beneath the mind, from which the kingdoms of the world of human thought may be surveyed. Some have made much of the point of view; others suggest that man seeks a point of viewing with more urgency than a point of view. This calls to our attention the fact that there is a certain dynamism involved in the matter. While the rationalist may believe that his treatment of the objective world rests upon the clearest principles, transparently visible to all enlightened men, he who is more critical will soon perceive that his criteria are chosen criteria. Out of the possible units upon which man’s thinking may depend as points of departure, the thinker evaluates a few as significant, and proceeds to utilize them.

Numerous and significant have been the errors which have proceeded from the assumption that one’s point of view is absolute and that is rests upon classic grounds. No less perilous has been the course of the skeptic, with his rejection of all objective basis for his norms. The plain man, with his partial and uncritical acceptance of at least a minimum of objective given in reason, seems to have a certain advantage over either the rationalist or the anti-rationalist. At the same time, he is at the mercy of the competing candidates for the place of master-perceptive in his thinking. How can he know that he has attained a vantage point for his mental life which does justice to his character as a man, and which is adequate to bring within his comprehension the wealth and richness of human experience?

This raises the entire problem of the choice of perspectives. To the mind of man, unwilling to content itself with scattered data and fragmentary knowledge, there have come historically many systems claiming ability to house the manyness of human experience under their own special highest generalizations. Certainly all of the competitors are not equally valid. Nor can any system maintain itself which is wholly false. Some have sought to solve the problem by suggesting that every system can but prophesy in part, and that since the field of possible units of thought is so large that no human canopy can be large enough to shelter them all, the several possible systems—and the perspectives upon which they severally rest—are all valid so far as they go. Thus, it is unfair to call any one of them true or false; the most that can be said is that they are more or less adequate.

This raises the problem of the relation of Christianity to the many competing schemes of human thought, and of its perspective to those assumed in them. Does Christianity propose to give to its adherents a simple and restricted group or ‘redeemptive truths’ which are to be the basis for the life of the heart, and then leave
them to find their way about as best they can among the welter of proposed ways of thinking common to man? Or, does the man who embraces the Christian Evangel in so doing commit himself to a great deal more? While the Gospel is not in itself a metaphysical or scientific system, it does profess to be set within a set of presuppositions which involve man's view of the world at many points. And if it expresses its Lord who claimed to be 'the Truth' it must to be valid embody such fundamental assumptions as are in accord with objective fact, rightly interpreted by sound reason.

To discover the distinctively Christian way of viewing things, it will not do to consult uncritically the thought of those who profess adherence to the Christian message. Whether we like it or not, such persons have held the most diverse of world-views. This has been more conspicuously the case in recent times, when the chief competitor for the outlook of Christian supernaturalism has brought to the western world, and particularly to the Western Hemisphere a technological progress and a general improvement of living standards so conspicuous as to draw all save the faint hearted along with it. We refer to the outlook of modern science, which has provided great sectors of our population with a world-view which holds (to oversimplify) that nothing is meaningful which cannot be verified scientifically. This restricts dogmatically the range of what the 'educated' man may hold to be significant to that which falls within the range of statistical measurement of predictable sequences.

Not only is this outlook dominant for the thinking of that sector of our society which is trained in scientific matters. Multitudes who are untrained in science nevertheless operate upon the assumption that the method which has aided us in the understanding of the natural world and which has demonstrated its adequacy as a means for conquering the world of natural process, can reveal to us all of the reality that there is. The Modern Man has been slow to see that the acceptance of the scientific method as a limiting notion is in itself a subjective assumption that the real world (that is, the meaningful world) is the world of natural process.

The question arises, how can men of good will view their world and see it so differently? How can two persons of similar background survey their experiences, and see therein two radically different kinds of world? Some have answered by saying that one or the other neglects to see experiences as a whole. Doubtless this is true in many cases. At the same time, comprehensiveness of vision is not in itself a guarantee of a correct point of view. The real issue is determined, not by the range of data which are seen by the thinker, but by the data which he sees as significant, and which he utilizes as categories for the interpretation of the whole.

The supposed objectivity of the scientific method gives to it an initial charm with the contemporary mind. The authority of facts, the classification of particulars into generalizations, the technique of verification, and the prediction of future events as determined occurrences, all make a powerful appeal in the light of the triumphs of modern science. What is not so easily seen is, that the scientific method takes for granted the individual who thinks, who measures, who verifies, and who relates data into generalizations. it has no techniques for dealing with the major questions which shape the thinker, notably the self-transcending qualities of moral valuation and freedom, nor for evaluating his persistent religious life.

The inability of scientism to deal with the more fundamental problems of human existence is slowly becoming apparent. The very destructive uses to which the products of the scientific method have been and are being put are calling attention to ranges within human experiences with which the scientific outlook cannot deal. The present religion may be a deeper dissatisfaction that is, a new dissatisfaction than the old. The secularist who has been slow to recognize that scientism has not only pushed technological development in advance of our ethical pro-
gress, but that it has actively retarded man's ability to cope with the pressures created by its developments in research. Its norms and dogma have become determinative for contemporary education in ethics, sociology and religion until the public mind has been scorched over and rendered nominalistic with reference to moral and spiritual values. The crisis of fear precipitated by developments in nuclear fission, and by the prospect of the perfection of the H-bomb, is the result of a public mind caught unaware and sold short by a generation of education which has been impoverished by the dogmatic acceptance of a limit-notion which has denied the more basic levels of human existence.

Men are seeking a new place to stand—a new vantage point from which they may survey life and in terms of whose categories they may seek anew to understand it. At long last they are willing to criticize their assumptions, and to consider the Christian Faith as a live alternative to scientific naturalism. As they do so, the question arises, whether there is time for the contemporary mind to think its way back, or whether emergency is so close upon us that the only answer possible to the generality of men is that of perishing with the falling house of scientism. This is a question which one would not answer hastily. There are those, however, who are seeking to criticize the scientific worldview, and who seek to examine afresh the point of view offered by the Christian religion.

Abingdon-Cokesbury Press has just released a volume which seeks to render this service to the Christian world. The Christian Perspective, by Edward T. Ramsdell, grows out of the author's concern with the problem of the relation of reason to faith in a day when growing world-ills are forcing a renewed interest in Christian thought. Ramsdell has packed so much into these 218 pages that any adequate survey of the material would lose itself in length. His central thesis is put as follows: "The meaning which any thinker finds...is limited by, and relative to, the perspective in which he views them." (p. 23.)

The opening chapter deals with the question of perspective as it touches the correlates, Faith and Reason. Criticizing in turn naturalism, scientism, pure rationalism, antirationalism and the coherence theory of truth, Ramsdell probes the shallow solutions offered by those systems which seek to operate independent of the Christian Weltanschawung. This latter he defines as follows: "Christian faith, then, is a way of looking at the whole of experience, including crisis, that grows out of the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the climactically and literally critical fact within that whole." (p. 40) So far, so good. Those, however, who have learned when reading books of this type to wait for the author's definition of terms will find themselves wondering, at the end of Chapter I, what the author will do with such questions as The Word, the Incarnation, Salvation, and the like.

To clear the ground for the analysis of the content of the Christian perspective, the author devotes a chapter to the question of the Paradox. In this he makes clear both the agreements with, and the differences from, the Dialectical Theology which his own personal view implies. To Ramsdell, Paradox is a device for the probing of philosophical depth, a phenomenological tool to more profound understanding. He has no patience with dialectic for its own sake, and refuses to remain in theological suspense with Richard Kroner or Erich Frank. Paradox grows out of the limitation of perspective, not out of any intrinsic and existential quality of the Eternal God. Here he finds even Kierkegaard, in the Postscript, to be in agreement.

The element of importance for the Christian faith, thinks Ramsdell, is that the "Truth of the divine Word" affords for the believer the dimension of paradoxes may be transcended in faith. Christ becomes thus the unifying insight, in terms of which not only the doctrines of Christianity, but the paradoxes of human experience, may be comprehended insofar as the finite mind may comprehend them. The motive for the quest
for such understanding is, of course, redemption rather than comprehension.

The author's treatment of the questions of Revelation (pages 62-94) and Christ as the Word Incarnate (pages 95-125) reflect much of the methodology and conclusions of the Dialectical theologians. The general acceptance of the composite authorship of the Pentateuch and of Form Criticism of the New Testament, brings the author to an understanding of the Christian Scriptures which subordinates the factuality of the Bible to its value as a vehicle for revealing the Incarnation as an instrumentality for bringing "the divine goodness within the grasp of our human understanding." Ramsdell sees every movement of God, including His movings within the human mind, as primarily redemptive, never merely theoretical.

As a category for the understanding of man, the author utilizes the concept of sin. The chapter developing this phase of Ramsdell's thought is probably the least convincing of the book as an expression of the Christian viewpoint. Taking for granted the continuity of man, in his physical organism at least, with lower and simpler forms of life, and viewing as absurd the historical Fall, he utilizes the concept of the demonic in substantially the same form as used by the Crisis theologians. Sin is held to lie in the discovery of freedom; man "tends to sin because, as a finite creature not yet spiritually mature, he cannot understand the meaning of his freedom as he discovers it." (p. 142). Sin inheres, then, in man's estimate of himself as he discovers his freedom. One gets the feeling that Ramsdell, like Niebuhr, defines sin much too simply (putting the part, namely assertion of autonomy, for the whole), and neglects the element of man's alienation from God through transgression.

The final chapter, "The Cross: Its Background and Meaning" explores the meaning of Law, of repentance, of atonement, and of the Christian life. The burden of the message of the Cross is, it seems to Ramsdell, that it objectified something which was eternally the case. As a dramatic portrayal of a Divine attitude, it becomes the ground for our repentance. Atonement is analyzed into its objective and subjective elements; the former is treated as a mystery, the latter is offered as an explanation for the origin of the atonement-idea. This reviewer can find no trace in this treatment of an objectivistic view of the atonement; the author suggests, for example, that "The symbol of blood has no legal significance whatever for the Christian faith." (p. 187).

This is not to say that Ramsdell does not find the idea of atonement valuable as a paradigm; it dramatizes the seriousness of sin, and highlights self-giving love (Agape). He does not, however, find in the Cross an objective ground for our justification, nor the procuring cause for the regenerating and sanctifying ministry of the Gospel. In other words, his view of the death of Christ is that it terminates chiefly on man, bringing to bear upon him inducements to better attitudes and conducts.

This volume embodies both merits and weaknesses. Being something of a synthesis of Personal Idealism and the Dialectical Theology, it is on the one hand slanted against materialism and toward freedom, and on the other, it seeks to preserve some meaning in the category of The Word of God in the midst of the standard liberal approach to the Bible. It is strong in its analysis of the problems involved in the attainment of a perspective, and in its criticism of contemporary naturalism.

On the other hand, it is equivocal at the point of the Supernatural. The regular sequences of nature seem to the author more impressive than any possible divine interventions could be. Some of the significant phases of the Christian message which force the issue of natural/supernatural are neatly avoided. The author himself believes firmly that the Christian message implies the pattern of insights essential to an inclusive and meaningful perspective to the whole of experience. His contribution there is significant; could he combine an adequate definition of that message with doubtless offer to