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John Martin Creed

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTORY

It is my final aim in these lectures to approach and, if it may be so, to clarify, the high theme of the doctrine of Our Lord's Person in the Church of this our age. But my method will be indirect. I propose to pass in review the main types of interpretation of his Person which have proved themselves to be significant in theological thought since the close of the eighteenth century. It is unlikely that we shall be able to appropriate any one of these types of interpretation in its original form, and even less likely that we shall be able to effect an eclectic synthesis of different views. But, for reasons which I shall give later, I believe that there is hope of advance by a process of appreciating and differing from the chief theological leaders of the age which now lies behind us.

There must always be something arbitrary in the choice of a *terminus a quo* for a historical survey such as I have in mind. Fresh movements of thought, changes in method, modifications of sentiment, can seldom or never be exactly dated. There is always a preparation for a new step. For any innovator we can always find precursors. In retrospect a revolution is apt to appear less of a revolution than it seemed to be to its leaders at the time. Moreover, it is an ineluctable law of human life that change follows change, and, since men cannot for the most part carry a multiplicity of problems in their heads at the same time, when a generation is called upon to

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meet some new situation, almost of necessity it loses its sense for the issues of an earlier crisis. On a backward glance it is more impressed by the continuity of past history than by the revolutions which have marked its progress. It is apt to think that essential change has been reserved for the crisis which impends.

In much recent writing on religion as on other aspects of life there is a perceptible tendency to depreciate the extent and the importance of the change which passed over the world of thought about the beginning of the last century. To those who took part in that flowering of speculative thought, of poetry, of historical enquiry, which we know as the Romantic Movement, it seemed that the old had passed away and that all things had become new. By intuition and imagination the spirit of man was once more in contact with the informing spirit of the universe. The cold formalism of the preceding age thawed and dissolved before the genial warmth. The forces of life in all their infinite variety were revealed once more. Withal a new outlook on religion gained ground. The Christian religion, the ancient historic faith, was re-discovered and reinstated. Natural religion, with other formalisms, was dethroned, and scope was to be allowed for the positive faith of the Church of Christ to regenerate the life of men and nations. Such was the promise of the movement in the eyes of many who lived in the first decades of the last century. It is inevitable that the movement should present itself to our generation in a very different light. We are widely removed not only in time but also in temper from those days. The ideas no longer awaken a spontaneous response. The Romantic Move-

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ment has taken its place in history and we now ask with a certain air of detachment what it actually achieved, and how much that is really new may be ascribed to its influence. We are more conscious than were contemporaries of continuity between the categories of eighteenth-century thought and the philosophies of Schleiermacher and of Hegel. "The customary view", writes Ernst Cassirer, "that the eighteenth century was a specifically 'unhistorical' century is a conception which has not itself been historically grounded nor can it be: it is rather a battle-cry and a watch-word minted by Romanticism to enable it to take the field against the philosophy of Illumination. But if we look more closely into the course of this campaign we find that it is the Illumination itself which forged the weapons which were used to conduct it. The historical culture which was called up on the side of Romanticism against the Illumination, and in the name of which the intellectual presuppositions of the Illumination were contested, was first discovered in virtue of these presuppositions, in virtue of the ideas and ideals of the Illumination. If Romanticism had not had the help of the Philosophy of the Illumination, and if it had not taken possession of its spiritual legacy, it could never have attained or kept its own position. It differed widely from the Illumination in the content of its conception of history, and in the matter of its 'philosophy of history', but none the less in method it remained continuously bound to the Illumination and under the deepest of obligations to it. For it is the eighteenth century which in the sphere of history, as elsewhere, set the fundamental philosophical problem. It raised the question as to the conditions of the possibility

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of history, as it raised the question concerning the conditions of knowing nature.”¹ Perhaps we may say that the Romantic Movement represents a re-ordering of the eighteenth-century inheritance under the influence of an idealistic philosophy of organism: and if we do not demur in principle to a generalisation of this kind, should we not regard Romanticism as the last phase of the Illumination rather than as the beginning of the epoch in which we live?

In the emergence of such questions and in the new perspective to which they point we see symptoms of a profound change which is taking place within ourselves. For in the main it is true that so far as the nineteenth century was in possession of distinctive and constructive ideas in philosophy and in theology, it derived them from the great idealistic systems of Kant and his successors. In the early decades of the nineteenth century philosophical speculation assumed control for the last time of the intellectual and spiritual life of the age. In Germany at any rate the special sciences were inspired, co-ordinated and directed by a philosophical world view. The movement reached its climax with Hegel, and for some time after his death Hegelian Idealism continued to be the chief force in the academic teaching and the public life of Germany. About the middle of the century the reign of Hegel ended, and the sciences, natural and historical, asserted their autonomy. Philosophy and theology were compelled by the forces of the age to accept as it were a departmental status. Yet this revolution, profound and far reaching as it has been in its effects, did not end the influence of the classical philosophy of Germany and of the theology

¹ E. Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (1932), pp. 263 f.

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which had been so closely associated with that philosophy. For both philosophy and theology recovered their balance and discovered fresh lines of active development by a return to the fountain head of modern philosophy, Immanuel Kant. Albeit working within a more restricted field, philosophers made fresh applications of other sides of Kant's teaching, epistemological, ethical and religious, maintaining a much needed criticism of the presuppositions of the Natural Sciences and attempting to synthesise the conclusions of the various autonomous sciences in a comprehensive idealistic view of the world. Until near the end of the century academic philosophy may be said to have continued for the most part to work on the lines laid down by Kant.

In our own country thought does not move, so to speak, collectively, as it appears to us to do in Germany. I suppose that with us systematic philosophy is much less influential, and it is also more individual. It is not easy to generalise about English thought in our period. The Utilitarian philosophy of the later eighteenth century lived long and productively into the nineteenth. It is enough to recall here the name of John Stuart Mill, who, though his mind was touched by other influences, remained fundamentally Utilitarian to the last. Here in Cambridge we still revere the name of Henry Sidgwick, a characteristically English mind, untainted by German transcendentalism. Yet when all necessary reservations have been made, it will scarcely be disputed that from the time of Coleridge onwards, Idealism, Kantian or Hegelian, has been a pervasive factor, and often a dominant factor, in British philosophical thought and, what is especially

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important for us, it was the idealistic tendency which decisively influenced theology. First we may name Coleridge, later Frederick Denison Maurice who with many another had drunk deep of Coleridge's spirit. From a widely different standpoint Mansel attempted to apply the agnostic side of Kant's teaching to the defence of a threatened orthodoxy. Later again the fresh development of Hegelianism on British soil, after it had been discredited in the home of its birth, has been profoundly important for English theology in the later decades of the last century. It is important still.

But how very different is the position in which we find ourselves to-day from the position of a quarter of a century ago! In our own country Idealism still boasts illustrious representatives; it still wins fresh recruits. But whereas at the beginning of this century an Idealist epistemology was I suppose defended by a majority of philosophical teachers, by now the tide has for some time set in the direction of Realism. Some philosophers of note—especially in Cambridge—not only do not accept an Idealistic Metaphysic, but regard the whole attempt to frame a systematic theory of reality as a misunderstanding of the function of philosophy. Philosophy, as they conceive it, has the specific duty of investigating certain clearly defined and limited problems in logical analysis. At all costs it must maintain this, its critical character, and eschew the dangerous and elusive efforts of metaphysical construction. For philosophy as thus conceived religious issues can scarcely arise. Religion seems usually to be left with no clear status or recognition. This is indeed a remarkable contrast with the position of a few decades ago. The religious bearing of

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the theistic philosophies of thinkers such as James Ward and W. R. Sorley was obvious, and though it may be fairly questioned how far the philosophies of Bradley and Bosanquet or their disciple Mr Oakeshott succeed in doing justice to the demands of the religious consciousness, no one can mistake their high valuation of the religious side of life and their determination to make room for it in their thought. It is indeed hard to resist the impression that, valuable as has been the strict method of the new school as a corrective, the conception of philosophy, as understood by some at any rate of its adherents, has been gravely impoverished. We may conclude these observations by noting the significant hesitation of Dr Ewing's conclusions in his recent thorough examination of the Idealist philosophy.¹ He considers that the critics of the Idealist epistemology have not been answered, and he is deeply conscious of the debt which philosophy owes to the penetration of these critics. But he thinks that the reaction has gone too far, and that there are still lessons which the critics might learn from the great Idealists. Thus there is hesitation in his own attitude. But there is no hesitation at all in his rejection of the view that philosophy consists solely in the analysis of the meaning of "common-sense" statements. Philosophy for Dr Ewing is philosophy in the classical meaning of the word; he does not encourage us to expect a revival of Idealist epistemology, but he looks for a new synthesis which will take up the critical work of the logical analysts, and, when the tide turns as it inevitably will, make use of it in a fresh approach to the tasks of constructive thought.

¹ A. C. Ewing, *Idealism: a critical survey* (1934), Introduction.

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In Germany too there has been a breach with the Idealistic trend of nineteenth-century philosophy. The influential “phenomenological” doctrine of Husserl, with its fundamental distinction between ‘fact’ and ‘essence’, initiated a new method of philosophical analysis which was in conscious opposition to the older psychological logic, and leaned towards a quasi-Platonic Realism. And this revolution has been followed by vigorous attempts to grapple with the larger tasks of philosophy which in the later nineteenth century had fallen into the background. “There is a tendency”, we are told, “to attack philosophical problems in a new way, namely by abandoning the epistemological approach and starting from a fundamental phenomenon—either ‘Life’ or ‘Existenz’—which is perhaps deeper, certainly more realistic, although more impervious to analysis.”¹ In other words, the knowing mind is no longer in the centre of the picture; rather man finding himself in a concrete situation, judging it by a standard of absolute values, and responding to its demands for choice. This is a movement of criticism and revolt, but it is very different in its character from the criticism with which we are familiar in England. A new role is cast for philosophy in a scientific age. There is no suggestion that thought can revert to the earlier stage when the separate sciences were still in more or less conscious dependence upon philosophy, but philosophers must not be content to acquiesce in the autonomy of the sciences and to regard their own function as that of maintaining an epistemological criticism of the special sciences from without. The

¹ W. Brock, *Contemporary German Philosophy*, p. 45.

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newer philosophy finds its own problems emergent within the sciences themselves. Thus instead of being a mere development of the later nineteenth-century philosophy, these new movements rather wear the appearance of a fresh start; they draw inspiration not only, perhaps not chiefly, from the great leaders of the nineteenth century, but also from the great rebels of the last age, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Kierkegaard's fierce onslaught upon the Hegelian doctrine that the antitheses of human experience are all capable of resolution by the immanent absolute spirit, falls in with the temper of an age which finds the time so seriously out of joint that it no longer looks for salvation within itself. The world as known to us remains a broken unintelligible fragment which to the end leaves man questioning and unsatisfied. From Nietzsche German thought has imbibed a new and a higher conception of the philosopher's calling—not the mere criticism of naturalism, nor the scholarly exploration of the history of thought, but an individual quest for the absolute values which afford a standard of criticism for all life. I suppose that in Germany the breach with the philosophical tradition of the late nineteenth century has been more emphatic than with us. But both here and there the signs of the times seem to indicate that we are moving to some new treatment of the ever-insistent problems which the development of the special sciences, above all else, has created for us.

Such a change as this which we have observed cannot but have a meaning for theology. Though philosophy is not theology, and though theology can never wisely identify itself in any exclusive sense with any one philosophy,

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it is in the very nature of things that each should react upon the other. There is no question as to the close connexions and interactions which have existed in past history between philosophy and theology, and we may anticipate that such interaction—perhaps in the future as in the past not without friction—will recur. There is indeed one view of philosophy which, in its extreme form at any rate, would seem entirely to snap the link between itself and theology. I mean the view to which I have already referred that philosophy is to be limited to the analysis of the deliverances of common-sense. But

If indeed there be
 An all-pervading Spirit, upon whom
 Our dark foundations rest, could he design
 That this magnificent effect of power,
 The earth we tread, the sky that we behold
 By day, and all the pomp which night reveals;
 That these—and that superior mystery
 Our vital frame, so fearfully devised,
 And the dread soul within it—should exist
 Only to be examined, pondered, searched,
 Probed, vexed and criticised?¹

The poet here may speak for the theologian, but, if I mistake not, he speaks for some philosophers as well.

When now we turn to some of the more recent developments in theology we find what we should expect to find—a change of interest and emphasis related to, and in part created by, that change in the position of philosophy which I have tried briefly to sketch. The most vigorous theological movement of these post-war years has been in conscious reaction against the dominant tendencies of the nineteenth century. If theology from Schleiermacher to

¹ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, Book iv.