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Reception afterwards in D'Autremont Hall

AN UNWANTED LEGACY?

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I

"There is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the life of Jesus.

"The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.

"This image has not been destroyed from without, it has fallen to pieces, cleft and disintegrated by the concrete historical problems which came to the surface one after another, and in spite of all the artifice, art, artificiality, and violence which was applied to them, refused to be planed down to fit the design on which the Jesus of the theology of the last hundred and thirty years had been constructed, and were no sooner covered over than they appeared again in a new form....

"The study of the Life of Jesus has had a curious history. It set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found Him it could bring Him straight into our time as a Teacher and Saviour. It loosed the bands by which He had been riveted for centuries to the stony rocks of ecclesiastical doc-

trine, and rejoiced to see life and movement coming into the figure once more, and the historical Jesus advancing, as it seemed, to meet it. But he does not stay; he passes by our time and returns to His own. What surprised and dismayed the theology of the last forty years was that, despite all forced and arbitrary interpretations, it could not keep Him in our time, but had to let Him go. He returned to His own time, not owing to the application of any historical ingenuity, but by the same inevitable necessity by which the liberated pendulum returns to its original position." {1}

These are famous words from the conclusion of Albert Schweitzer's <u>Quest of the Historical Jesus</u>. (1906) I recall them not in order to defend the correctness of Schweitzer's "consistent eschatology," though I believe it to be largely right, certainly as against Adolph Harnack's idea of the Kingdom, nor to support Schweitzer's own quasi-mystical idea of "the real immovable historical foundation which is independent of any historical confirmation or justification" whereby Jesus "means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from Him and flows through our time also" (2) -- which I judge to be largely wrong -- but because these sentences so aptly point to the distress of theology at the end of the nineteenth century, a distress from which I think we have by no means recovered.

This was not of course a theological distress felt openly by pious Protestant orthodoxy, or by nascent Fundamentalism, or by Catholic traditionalism -- all of which steadfastly resisted the temptation to live honestly in the modern world. But it was a

discomfort evident throughout liberal Protestantism and for a brief moment it appeared in Catholicism in the work of the so-called modernists (then to be denied but later to return).

In a word, the distress involved the most painful tensions over the nature of revelation and faith, over the availability of Jesus Christ as an object of faith, over the authority and value of the Christian moral imperative, and over the relations of these three to one another.

II

To understand the full force of these problems, we need to go back a third of a century before Schweitzer to the work of the most influential Protestant theologian of the latter 19th century, Albrecht Ritschl of Göttingen, whose disciples by the last decade of the century occupied major chairs in every German theological faculty but one.

Ritschl was not, to my mind, a truly seminal thinker. But he was a remarkably characteristic thinker, and his classic work <u>Justification and Reconciliation</u> (1870 ff.) epitomizes the concerns and the themes of late 19th century theology. In the tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ritschl knew that the old supernaturalism had to be abandoned and that the external authority of an infallible scripture or creed must be rejected. A new beginning is sought, in which the scriptures are fully open to critical investigation, in which the meaning of revelation must be reconsidered at the root, in which the historical development of Christianity has to be fully recognized, and in which the force of the modern world of thought is honestly faced.

Ritschl was not himself theologically uncomfortable. To be sure, he had no use for metaphysics in theology, and he was fearful of the threat of a modern scientific worldview to the freedom and value of human personality that had always been central to the Christian view of things. But in his own scheme of thought, personal faith, scientific history and ethical demand lived in comfortable harmony, presenting a view of Christianity intelligible and persuasive to modern culture.

Where does Christian thinking begin, for Ritschl? Not with the immediacy of religious experience, as for Schleiermacher, but with historical fact. Christianity is an historical religion and to know its essential character we must look to its origins, to its Founder. Thus back to the New Testament! --- and of course by way of the Reformation.

And what do we find? Historical study uncovers for us the way in which all assertions about the lordship of Christ are grounded in his historical life. On the one side, this means his own "religious" existence: his perfect trust in God, his unique sonship and consciousness of it, as one known and loved by God as the personal vehicle of God's self-revelation. Equally and inseparably, this means Jesus' ethical vocation: his obedience and fidelity, his perfectly fulfilling the calling laid upon him as as the founder of the kingdom of God, which is the universal ethical fellowship that is God's will for humanity, and thus Jesus' own moral lordship, his finding of his own end in God's end.

What Jesus was for himself, he is also for us. His moral

loyalty to his vocation was based in his perfect trust in God, in his unique sonship and consciousness of being known and loved by God as the personal vehicle of God's self-revelation, whereby he What he was, he was first of all for himself. God's word. is But precisely in being that, he is "for us." He realizes the end for others and is availing for them. He is the perfect revelation of God, in whom God is revealed as love. He is the archetype of moral personality, through whose impulse and direction we are able to enter his relation to God and the world, to acquire spiritual lordship and adopt as our supreme purpose the kingdom Because of this, we apprehend that Jesus has the value of God. of God for us. Personal faith in Jesus Christ as the Founder and as the source of our forgiveness means precisely the appropriation of his worth for us. (Ritschl calls this a value-judgment, which is not merely belief in the truth of Jesus' history, nor a theoretical judgment regarding his Godhead, but faith in his divine worth.) Because Jesus does for us what only God can do, he has the worth of God for us.

The religious and the ethical are perfectly joined in Jesus Christ; so also the existence of the Christian believer is defined both as God's objective will for the kingdom, subjectively accepted as our own highest good, and as justification and reconciliation, in the same duality of gift and task.

So in all this, history, faith and ethics are held together in close harmony. The historical life of Jesus is reliably available to us in the witness of the New Testament as the object for our faith-judgment and that faith judgment is at the same time both the experience of forgiveness and the ground and impe-

rative of moral action in the world.

III

Thirty years after the publication of Ritschl's work, scientific history, personal faith and the moral imperative are still held together--though perhaps not quite so comfortably--in Adolph Harnack's famous <u>Das Wesen des Christentums</u>, the popular lectures of 1900 that within two years elicited some eleven books in commentary from German Protestants, fourteen Catholic responses, six translations and scores of additional articles and reviews. (3)

This work of Harnack's is often held up as the archtypical expression of liberal Protestantism. And that is not altogether Harnack's idea of faith as the personal a wrong judgment. encounter of the soul with God <u>did indeed</u> represent the widely shared appeal to religious experience by Continental, British and American thinkers who could no longer accept an infallible scripture or a binding doctrinal formulation as the adequate basis for Christian life or theological reflection. Harnack's belief the real availability to modern man of the Jesus of history-in though not necessarily his particular interpretation of the Jesus so uncovered--did reflect a prevailing judgment among greater and lesser theological lights that despite uncertainties over details of the synoptic record the results of critical history were such as to support the central affirmations about Jesus Christ as the decisive revelation of God and the redeemer of mankind. And Harnack's location of the "essence" of Christianity in the "permanently valuable" elements in the gospel did seem to secure

a positive connection between the gospel and modern thinking, with relevant imperatives for Christian life in the contemporary world.

But already the strains within and among these elements were becoming visible.

The question of the nature and certitude of faith, for one thing, was a veritable preoccupation, almost an obsession, of late 19th century theology--both Protestant and Catholic. And to know this helps us to understand not only the concerns of Protestant liberals and Catholic modernists, but also the forces shaping the decrees of Vatican I and and the rise of modern fundamentalism. We are not particularly concerned with these latter two, but it is the case that almost everyone was affected by the broadened stream (or flood) of Victorian doubt (Houghton) or what N. S. Talbot in 1912 called a kind of "cosmic nervousness" about the meaning and surety of faith. (4)

This was, in fact, a double-sided problem. On the one hand it was the repeated question, how can one be sure? how can one have certainty in faith? And on this question there is a whole literature in the latter decades of the 19th century, much of it echoing the claim of Ludwig Ihmels that "a faith that has no certainty is not worth talking about." (5) On the other hand, while there was a good deal of quite generalized, relaxed and untroubled, usually conventional and uninteresting, confidence in the appeal to religious experience as the basis of religious affirmation, there were also many signs of an intense struggle to show the self-certifying nature of faith by an internal analysis of that experience.

The other side of the problem was, does faith have supports? that is, is there a positive relation of faith judgments to other sorts of human judgments? And for the most part it was felt that there is a continuity between religious knowing and other ways of knowing, including those of science and philosophy, as well as those of history, sp that the latter could be supports of faith. But even where this was believed, there was the haunting undertone of the search for an internal analysis of the act of faith that would directly reveal its autonomy and its certainty.

Listen, for example, to the following claims for the selfcertifying nature of faith:

"Faith is a principle of immediateness.... the soul is created for religious communion, and, in this communion, attains to religious certainty." -- Egbert Smyth of New England. {6}

"In the very constitution of the human soul there is provision for an immediate apprehension of God." -- The British unitarian James Martineau. (7)

"Modern theology begins with a consideration of the phenomena of the religious life itself." -- William Adams Brown of Union in New York. (8)

Faith is a "primary intuition," deeper and more elemental even than seeing, willing and loving. "Belief is only intelligible by believing. ... Faith can only reiterate, in response to the demand for definition, 'faith is faith.'" Faith is a "profound and radical act of the inner soul." -- Scott Holland of Oxford. (9)

The starting point for understanding faith is the necessity

of "instinctive affirmation." -- Will Spens of Cambridge. {10} Faith is "an independent, original, psychological act." -- Auguste Sabatier of Paris. {11}

And correlative with assertions of this sort is the flourishing of a new interest in mysticism in the closing years of the 19th century. (Jones, Underhill, von Hügel, William James and others. James was, of course, the great exception to this demand for certainty, but that is a story for another day.)

IV

The pinnacle, however, of the focus on an immediate and innermost certainty of faith is surely to be found in the work of Wilhelm Herrmann, whose <u>Communion of the Christian with God</u> was one of the most widely read texts of theology in both Germany and America. Herrmann was the teacher of both Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. The drive for certitude, to meet the needs of the ordinary Christian in a modern world, was strong in him. Terms like "full certainty," "firm assurance," "indubitable," and "overcoming every doubt" recur on almost every page of Herrmann.

How is every doubt overcome? Simply through the innermost experience of "a communion of the soul with the living God through the mediation of Christ." That is a direct experience of communion with God -- not mystical, but mediated by history. It is an experience which is utterly unassailable by philosophy, for theology has nothing to do with metaphysics, or by science, whose objective way of knowing is wholly different from faith's affirmations, or even by scientific history. The last can do much

to destroy false props of faith, but because it can never yield anything more than probabilities, it is finally quite unable to touch, either in support or in denial, the root and undeniable fact of the communion of the soul with the inner life of Jesus through which alone God is apprehended. The conviction of the believer has absolutely nothing to do with science's "objective" way of knowing the world. Rather, the two objective facts on which rest the Christian's consciousness that God communes with us are the immediate fact "that we hear within ourselves the demand of the moral law," and "the historical fact <u>(geschicht= liche Tatsache</u>) of the Person of Jesus." {12}

V

But now we are back to the question of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, which had surfaced strikingly in a debate in 1892 between Herrmann and Martin Kähler. Kähler published a small work, not all that much noticed at the time (Schweitzer, for example, does not even refer to it in <u>The Quest of the</u> <u>Historical Jesus</u>) but later much esteemed, under the title "Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche biblische Christus." (13) Here he drew a sharp, even arbitrary, distinction between the usually interchangeable German terms for "historical" -- <u>historisch</u> and <u>geschichtlich</u>-- a distinction much debated for two decades and revived in the 20th century, notably by Bultmann and his school. <u>Historisch</u> was to refer to the process and the results of scientific or critical historical analysis, which detaches itself at the outset from presuppositions of faith and

operates on neutral principles of analogy. This was the presumed pattern of the "life of Jesus" movement.

But that whole movement, for Kähler, was simply a blind alley. It started from a worthy motive: to distinguish the biblical and historical Christ from the Christ of dogma. But its attempt to produce a real life of Jesus was simply futile. "We have no sources for a biography of Jesus of Nazareth which measures up to the standards of contemporary historical science," but only "a vast field strewn with the fragments of various traditions." Therefore the biographers, on the basis of psychological analogies and preconceived religious and ethical views, had to create an historical (<u>historisch</u>) Jesus--who was simply a fantasy. And that is to say that the so-called scientific history was as much controlled by dogmatic presuppositions as was the Byzantine christology. This new historicism is no better than the old gnosticism. (Also of course in this search for a minimum of "historically reliable" facts, the ordinary believer is left hopelessly at the mercy of the shifting probabilities emerging from the scientifically trained minds).

The alternative is therefore the <u>geschichtliche Christus</u>, the Christ known by an historical reason shaped from the beginning by the confession that Jesus is Lord, i.e. by the recognition that the divine cannot be separated out from the human in the gospel story of Jesus. The real Christ, the Christ of the whole New Testament witness, is one we set out to find not because he is like us but because he is unlike us, because we have faith, because he is revealed God and our savior. And this Christ, human <u>and</u> risen according to the total biblical proclamation, is

not known and <u>is</u> not, apart from his abiding effectiveness in the community. For <u>Geschichte</u>, in which the gospel history and the apostolic kerygma, pre-Easter and post-Easter, belong together, there is no dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

Wilhelm Herrmann responded immediately. (14) Kähler is right indeed in distinguishing the <u>historisch</u> and the <u>geschichtlich</u>. The <u>historisch</u> cannot secure for us Christ as the <u>ground</u> of faith because its results are only probable, whereas faith requires certainty. And Kähler is right in insisting that the gospels as much as the epistles are witness and that faith originates in the witness. But Kähler is wrong in confusing the "ground" of faith, which is given in the New Testament proclamation as the person (the inner spiritual reality) of Jesus, with the "content" of faith, which is the Christ of glory--and to confuse these is to move back in the direction of a false and external authority of the Bible.

But just here is where Herrmann finally waffled. For while he wanted to say that Jesus as the ground is not something discovered by <u>historisch</u> research, with its mere probabilities, not something "behind" the proclamation, yet scientific history does have the task of eliminating the false props and faith cannot be inattentive to such results as the correction of misunderstandings by those who reported the words of Jesus. And so Herrmann really needed more from the <u>historisch</u> than he thought--just as Kähler, on the other side, made the <u>historisch</u> and the <u>geschicht=</u> <u>lich</u> so utterly discrete that everything is finally guaranteed by

the faith of the church and the issue is evaded.

But now another dimension of the problem. In the same year as this debate, 1892, Johannes Weiss published his "Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God," which was to lie at the heart of Schweitzer's contention over a decade later. {15} With Kähler--and later Heinrich Holtzmann and others, Weiss was thoroughly skeptical about the possibility of writing a real "life" of Jesus. But more important, he first rightly grasped the general conception of the kingdom of God in Jesus's message. It was a conception from which all modern ideas must be eliminated, a kingdom which was wholly future, at present purely supra-mundane, which Jesus did not establish but only proclaimed. Thus arrived what Schweitzer called the third great alternative in the study of the life of Jesus: either eschatological or non-eschatological. And for Weiss, historical study shows the thoroughly eschatological nature of the message of Jesus. And that, despite all the struggles against it at the end of the century, was what Schweitzer found in 1906 to be the outcome of the whole quest.

So where are we? We have come, at the end of the century, to a point where a "biography" of Jesus is historically impossible. And yet, despite the later contentions of Arthur Drews and others that there wasn't enough evidence to justify even an existence for Jesus of Nazareth, there is enough historically ascertainable about Jesus's public ministry and his preaching to raise the most disturbing questions about both ancient and modern ways of believing in Jesus. As against Herrmann, Kähler, and all the rest, this historical (<u>historisch</u>) knowledge <u>does</u> have consequences for faith. What we can know of the public

ministry and teaching of Jesus does not support either the traditional Christological dogmas or the liberal assumptions about bringing Jesus directly into the modern world.

VI

this also means that the ethical imperative for But Christianity is called into question. The moral demands of Jesus on his disciples cannot be separated from his eschatology. They are not universally valid moral principles, to be applied anywhere and anytime. They are, in Schweitzer's view, interims Ethik, that is, demands on the disciples for the interim before the coming establishment of God's kingdom. And they are therefore strange to us. The kingdom is not something merely inward (Harnack), nor a kingdom of ends for the progressive moral organization of humankind (Ritschl). And the ethics of the kingdom does not lend itself as a guide for the transformation of the political and economic order of the ancient or of the modern world (vs. the Social Gospel).

In sum, the ethic of obedience to the will of God for modern humans cannot derive directly from the demands of Jesus. The human figure that we know as Jesus stands in painful contrast to both the traditional and the modern Christ of faith. The certainties of faith in the God of Jesus Christ have become the most troubling uncertainties. And the inner connections of the struggle for faith, the attachment to Jesus, and the relation of both to the moral life are shattered.

All this is summed up in that great figure who stands at the end of the 19th century -- Ernst Troeltsch, the towering example of the confrontation of traditional Christian faith and theology with the modern intellectual situation.

The history/faith question is posed in its sharpest form, and more inclusively than by Schweitzer, in Troeltsch's 1911 essay on "The Significance of the Historical Existence of Jesus for Faith." He writes:

"What can a picture of Jesus subject to and shaped by historical criticism mean for a faith that is by its very nature concerned with the eternal, timeless, unconditioned and supra-historical? When it first formed its religious ideas the primitive Christian community had already taken Jesus out of history and made him Logos and God, the eternal Christ appearing to us in historical form, one who is related in essence to the eternal Godhead and so not unnaturally the object of faith. But historical criticism, grown up in a world no longer dominated by the church, has finite and him to history where all is returned conditioned." (16)

Is it still possible, then, to speak of any "inner, essential significance of Jesus for faith?" David Friedrick Strauss, of course, much earlier in the century, had said No, and had proposed that the predicates of the Godman, which are valid, be applied not to Jesus, but to humanity as a whole. And much more recently, Andrew Drews, in his book <u>The Christ Myth</u>, had also

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VII

said No, because the evidence was not sufficient to show that there ever was any historical Jesus. {17}

Drews' book, though much discussed, and Troeltsch's essay was one of the responses, was not really of scientific merit. But it did pose the larger question of the danger to faith from the results of historical investigation -- a danger, that is, if there is any inseparable connection of faith to Jesus. How then, and this is Troeltsch's problem, can that connection be described? The problem is that <u>only</u> "on the basis of the ancient church's orthodox ideas of redemption, authority and church is there a real inner necessity for the historical person of Christ for salvation." There one can speak of an absolute necessity. But this finally means bowing to the supernatural authority of church and Bible, where everything is perfectly clear -- and that in fact is what ultimately happened with Kähler, and with the Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel. {18}

Now this sort of necessity is not available for those who accept historical criticism and research into the gospel narratives. For them, faith has been burdened with facts that are open to historical inquiry, and the connection has been relativized. The inseparability of faith and Jesus can only be put, not in terms of dogma or conceptual necessity, but in terms of social psychology, of the need of (any) religious community for "a support, center and symbol of its religious life" -- which is in fact the way the connection has been put (though in a concealed way) by Schleiermacher, Ritschl and Herrmann.

But this means uncertainty, the dependence of faith on the

results of historical inquiry. Troeltsch himself thought the overall picture of Jesus to be reliable enough that we need not despair. But there is no absolute certainty, once Jesus is put back into history and Christian origins are opened to historical inquiry in exactly the same way as the origins of any historical movement. Contrary to Kähler and Herrmann, faith in Jesus cannot be free from the possible negative outcomes of historical research. The symbol of Christ needs a firm and strong inner foundation in the fact of Jesus, but it is quite impossible to insulate faith against historical-critical inquiry.

if this is so -- we have to confront another Now uncertainty, an uncertainty about the absoluteness or finality of Christianity as such. Recall that Troeltsch stands at the end of a half century of a new kind of study of the history of religions, marked both by an explosion of information and by a new freedom for the European mind to become not only curious about other peoples' religions, but appreciative of them as authentic ways of expressing the human experience. That is a long story, which we cannot go into here. Suffice it to say that Christianity could no longer be simply thought of as the only and exclusively true religion, with the others written off as error infidelity. Nor could Christ be so easily held as the only or redeemer for all humanity.

For Troeltsch, the question of the "absoluteness" of Christianity was a lifelong concern. {19} And the upshot of his quest, once the old apologetic of miracle was given up -- as it had to be -- was that the old claim to absoluteness was gone forever. Of course, there could be a kind of naive and

unreflective sense of absoluteness in the relation to God in Jesus Christ. But both a better understanding of other religions and a right view of faith's relation to Jesus allow us to say only that Christianity is true "for us." We cannot show the centrality of Christ for all humanity, but only for Christianity. Nor can we say "whether in a hundred thousand years religion will be nourished on Jesus or will have some other canter." For us, God in Christ can "mean that in Jesus we reverence the highest revelation of God accessible to us and that we make the picture of Jesus the rallying point of all God's testimonies to himself found in our sphere of life." (20) But only <u>for us</u>.

Finally, then, what of ethics? I need only mention Troeltsch's great <u>Social Teaching of the Christian Churches</u>, which far more even than Harnack's <u>History of Dogma</u> put the whole of Christianity back into history. The important thing about this book is not the famous Church/Sect/Mysticism typology, influential as that has been, but the way in which it made clear once and for all the pluralism within Christianity. Every development of the religious idea in Christianity, every conception of the social and ethical tasks, has to be understood in connection with secular social formations. Historical inquiry shows us not one enduring Christian form and one permanently valid moral imperative, but many forms and many views of the imperative, so that one might better speak of Christianities and of Christian moralities.

The history of the Christian ethos is the story of constantly renewed search for compromise, without which the ideal

of the gospel cannot be realized in the world, as well as of fresh opposition to this spirit of compromise. Every statement of the Christian ethic is thus relative, i.e., relative to a particular historical-social context. The Christian ethos does indeed give a goal that lies "far beyond" the relativities of this earthly life, but just because of this every realization is relativized, so that "nowhere does there exist an absolute Christian ethic which only awaits discovery.... the Christian ethic of the present day and of the future will ... only be an adjustment to the world-situation." {21}

Here then, and on a much grander historical scale than for Schweitzer, the tension for the ethical is heightened. So here too Troeltsch stands properly at the end of the century. He <u>is</u> its outcome. The hope for confidence in personal faith, the need to make a living and powerful connection between that faith and the Jesus who is known by historical inquiry, and the call to moral transformation of personal and social life -- these are all there. Faith, history and ethics -- these, and their relations, were the overriding concerns of the late 19th century. But their claims now seem not to support one another. Instead, their demands seem to be in the most acute tension.

And that, I believe, is the legacy of the 19th century to the 20th. We may not want that inheritance, but we have no choice. And whether the 20th century has managed to ease those tensions, or whether they persist essentially without resolution, or perhaps without possibility of resolution, is a question I shall leave for you to ponder.

Footnotes

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