

# The Christian View of Man

By A. Campbell Garnett

THE NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN. *The Gifford Lectures. 2 vols. By Reinhold Niebuhr. Charles Scribner's Sons.*

IN HIS two masterly volumes of Gifford lectures Dr. Niebuhr has succeeded in reconciling the major tenets of traditional Protestant theology with a full acceptance of the findings of modern science and the historical criticism of the Bible. The doctrine of revelation has been broadened by a free use of the allegorical method of interpretation, but the doctrines of God and man, the soteriology and even the eschatology remain intact. This, in itself, is a striking achievement; but even more brilliant is his critical discussion of conflicting interpretations of Christian doctrines and modern sophistries, so that one almost forgets to be critical of the critic's own views. But space forbids that I should attempt to enumerate the places where his argument pleases and enlightens me. I must turn my attention to questions and differences. These concern chiefly the nature of man, the nature of sin, and the doctrine of the immanence of God. In order to show why I am not satisfied with Dr. Niebuhr's treatment of these problems I must first briefly state my own views.

## *The Divine Immanence*

Dr. Niebuhr calls our attention to many of the insights of Paul. But there is one which he misses; and it seems to me the most illuminating of all: "It is God that worketh in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). This is the immanence of God as *will*. It is a truth that has not been sufficiently appreciated in the history of theology. The Greek theology, following its own interpretation of the opening verses of the Fourth Gospel, thought of the divine immanence as reason. Dr. Niebuhr rightly shows the inadequacy of this view. But the Latin theology, which he favors, is worse. It obscures the immanence of God in man in its emphasis on his depravity and on the divine sovereignty. Under the influence of Plato and Augustine we have been offered the alternatives of God immanent in man as idea of the good, or that divine immanence lost and obscured by the corruption of sin.

But neither of these theories is correct. Even as sinners we feel the constraining power of God within. And yet even the best of us, under that constraint, may have a very false idea of what is good. That constraining power bids us do what *seems* to us the *greatest* good, whether in our own interest or not. By experiment we find out, more or less correctly, what is good. But our finite individuality, a product of biological and social forces, often tends to pursue the lesser, and especially the private, good—or seeming good. Yet, if only we take time for reflection, there is something within us that calls us to put the greatest good first—even at cost to ourselves and our favored delights. The will to our own good, and to this or that favored good, constitutes our individuality. The will to

the good seen as greatest is something universal in man though it can make itself felt only when we reflect upon our values. It is the essential factor in what ethics call conscience. In religion we call it the voice of God.

## *What Is Conscience?*

Because it makes itself felt when we reflect, and directs us to some ideal goal, philosophy has often mistaken thought the essential nature of conscience to be a set of ideas. But its ideational content varies. Its essence is *will*—a response to value, to the *quality* of the object held in mind. It does not do our thinking for us, but it constrains us to direct our thought and action ever toward the greater good. Modern man has lost his religious respect for conscience because it errs. Thinking that God, if immanent, must reveal himself in the form of ideas, he cannot believe that the confused voice of conscience is the voice of God.

Yet upon one thing that voice has spoken with ever increasing clarity the more man has reflected upon it. It does not tell him what is good, but it calls upon him to pursue the *greatest* good, even though it be at some cost to himself. Man can be willfully blind to that demand but he can escape it only by refusing to reflect. If he reflects calmly and adequately it allows of no exceptions—of race, class or creed. Beset as we are today, on one side by dogmatism and on the other by relativism, we desperately need this clear insight. It is God within that demands of us that we seek the good of all. But what principles and practices the good is to be found does not tell us. They vary with time and place; and we must rely upon consecrated intelligence to find them.

## *The Nature of Man*

Man's specific individuality is found in the framework of impulse and habit developed in the history of the individual and the race. It consists of will (the spontaneous response to value) as canalized in biological impulse and habit. It is these that give life its complexity, richness and power. They are often believed to constitute the freedom of the individual. But they are not really free. So far as they dominate his conduct he is a creature of his past choices and of heredity and environment. But when he reflectively deliberates on his problems of value, impulse and habit no longer thrust their preferred objectives so much into the foreground. He sees more clearly where the greater values lie. And if they lie in a direction opposed to those his individuality favors, then the essential value of will as response to value, to the value seen as greatest, asserts itself. It is not more powerful than impulse and habit. Yet it asserts itself with a peculiar constraint—as the form of will that *ought* to be obeyed. The system of impulse and habit which constitutes individuality must make an effort to conform, an effort of surrender.

This is the surrender of the self as private and

individual to the self as universal, the surrender of man to God, the triumph of the better self, which is really the divine, over the worse and merely human. In the effort of self-adjustment and self-control, whereby the will which is individual and canalized bows to and is united with the universal will from which it is derived, the self asserts its true freedom and recovers its integrity. And that act, like every other, contributes to the formation of a new habit—a habit of reflective discrimination of values and disinterested pursuit of the greatest good. Individuality is both enriched and more firmly integrated. It has grown—and grown in harmony with God.

It is in the conflict of the lower self (the self of individual impulse and habit) with the higher self (the self that disinterestedly pursues the good) that man becomes aware of God. He knows God primarily as the power that demands of him that he concern himself with the good of others besides himself. The primitive confuses this moral power with that of the excitement generated in the ceremonies in which he dramatizes its aims. Thence the element of false mysticism and magic enters into religion. The true thinker, on the other hand, recognizes the generality of the moral demand and develops the true mysticism that sees it as both immanent and transcendent to himself, as personal and universal. Thus man's knowledge of God, like his knowledge of other persons and of things, has its roots in immediate perception of active agency, and grows by thoughtful interpretation of the relation of that agency to others.

#### *A Tragic Blindness*

The blindness of so much of our theology to the great Pauline insight that it is God in us that wills the good is largely due to an interpretation of the Logos as merely the power of conceptual thought. In the Johannine progue, however, the Logos is primarily life and creative power (i.e., will) and only secondarily the light of men. Dr. Niebuhr seems to share this blindness and this error. When he raises the question as to how man comes to know God he turns, therefore, not to the Pauline insight that God is at work in man as will to the good, or even to the doctrine of the Logos, but to a pictorial phrase in the myth of creation. Man is made "in the image of God." This is true, but it is only a part of the great truth that God lives and works in us as well as we in him.

This "image," or likeness of man to God, Dr. Niebuhr finds in the self-transcendence of the knowing subject. The knower somehow stands outside the world of things he knows and even outside himself as he knows himself. This creates a sense of the "homelessness of the spirit" which drives it to reach beyond nature to find the meaning of life. It thus becomes aware of the infinite, of God. This is the only source that Dr. Niebuhr finds of any universal self-revelation of God to man. Yet that there is such a general and private revelation he agrees. And he also says that it is somehow associated with conscience. But because he has ignored the immanence of God as all-to-the-greatest-good he cannot see how.

This failure to see the manner of God's indwelling in man and its effect upon his conscience—a failure which many schools of thought share with Dr. Niebuhr—leads

to three tragic errors, one on the part of the humanists, and two on that of the orthodox. To the humanists it leaves man's conscience without authority. If people do not think it is in their interest to concern themselves with the good of others, and do not want to do so, the humanist can give them no reason why they should. He may call their attention to a still small voice within them that demands that they should do so, but he feels compelled to admit that it is only the echo of social pressures exerted in their childhood. The needed corrective to this weak and weakening explanation is to recognize that that within us which calls us to the service of others is the voice of God. Nothing less could call us, as this recognition does, to the service of *all* others, even of our enemies.

#### *Rigid Orthodoxy*

Of the errors of orthodoxy the first is one which Dr. Niebuhr's thesis encourages in worse forms than it commits. Failing to see the full and adequate nature of the revelation of God's will within, orthodoxy takes the specific forms in which history presents particular expressions of that divine will, as being specific revelations of absolute and general validity. Commandments and institutions thus acquire an impossible and uncompromising rigidity. Religious dogmatism is the result of the theologian's peculiar sin of pride—a setting forth of his own human interpretations of history as specific revelations. Man needs to find *some* moral authority and he leans on these because he has failed to see within himself the will of God urging upon him the ideal that contains "all the law and the prophets."

In the second place, this same failure leads to a loss of faith in one's fellow men. This is the tragic failure of that whole great theological movement from Augustine to Niebuhr. Those who do not see the divine in themselves do not see it in others, though the sins of men are plain. So man is regarded as fallen, depraved, lost. Pessimism regarding man's life here saps the hope and energy that would seek to better it. Distrust of human good will breeds fear, and fear breeds attempts at oppression.

#### *Revelation in History*

Dr. Niebuhr recognizes both a revelation that is internal, private and general, and one that is external, public and specific. But he is much too confident of his interpretations of the latter and he fails to see the full nature of the former. It should surely be plain that a revelation from without can do no more than elucidate the revelation from within, for it requires the inner witness to validate it. This Dr. Niebuhr seems to recognize. "Without the public and historical revelation the private experience of God would remain poorly defined and subject to caprice. Without the private revelation of God, the public and historical would not gain credence" (Vol. I, p. 127). But unless the private and general revelation were much more than what is indicated in Dr. Niebuhr's interpretation of the *imago Dei* it could not serve to give credence to the revelation of God that we have in Christ. Nothing short of God at work in us as willing and demanding that we serve the good of all could bear witness to the revelation of God in the self-sacrificing love of Jesus

of Nazareth. Here the "homelessness of the spirit" that sends it seeking the infinite is utterly inadequate.

### *History and the Antichrist*

Dr. Niebuhr's whole thesis leans heavily upon assumptions concerning specific revelation, but the criteria of such revelation are never defined. This allows a dangerous latitude which is well illustrated in the way in which the figure of the Antichrist is used to distort the meaning of history. By factual argument it is shown that human progress is never undiluted gain, that each advance, though it solves old problems and attains a genuinely higher level, creates new evils upon that higher level. The Antichrist is then interpreted as a symbol of this truth, and the fact that it is presented as appearing at the end of history is said to indicate "that history cumulates, rather than solves, the essential problems of human existence" (Vol. II, p. 318).

But the pessimism introduced by this arbitrary treatment of an alleged revelation is not warranted by the facts. It is true that growth and change are not always progress, but it is not true that progress is illusory. It is true that every new level of achievement raises new problems and is marred by new evils of its own, but it is not true that the problems are "cumulative" or the new evils worse than the old. Unemployment and public relief, for example, which are the new evils at the level of our economy of abundance, are not as bad as the starvation and misery of an economy of want. Similarly, the evils inherent in democratic government are less oppressive and demoralizing than those of oligarchy, autocracy and slavery.

### *The Nature of Sin*

For Dr. Niebuhr the basic sin is pride. Man in his self-transcendence becomes conscious of his finitude and grows anxious for himself. He revolts against his finitude and tries to overcome it. He seeks security at the cost of injustice to others. Pride of power, of knowledge and of virtue ("spiritual" pride) are the typical forms of sin. Sensuality is an inordinate love of lower values resulting from love of self, which is (incorrectly) identified with pride.

In this interpretation of sin Dr. Niebuhr is again misled by his assumptions concerning specific revelation. In the myth of the Fall the sin is pride and this is taken as a symbolical revelation of the origin of sin. But the Old Testament interpretation of sin as founded in pride is due to the nature of the sin against which the prophets were contending—the arrogance of wealth and power and the spiritual pride of a "chosen" people. Paul's interpretation also, much quoted by Dr. Niebuhr, is rooted in the Old Testament and in an experience similar to that of its writers.

Jesus' interpretation of sin goes much deeper. But Paul, who had never companied with Jesus, seems hardly to have heard of it. The Gospel writers record it but show little understanding of it. Yet it is the only theory of sin that can maintain the reality of moral responsibility in the face of our modern knowledge of the psychology of motivation. Its type is the spiritual inertia of the ninety-

and-nine who are content with what environment and consequent habits have made them and fail to *strive* after values higher still. Spiritual inertia is spiritual death. At the lower levels of personal development it is the habit of sensuality that stifle the *effort* of the individual to adjust his mind to the pursuit of the greater values. At the higher levels it is the attitude of pride, especially pride of knowledge and virtue. At every level it is that of selfishness.

But at every level the will in its essential freedom which is God within us, responds to the greatest value that the individual intelligence at the moment discerns. It is enmeshed in the particular habits, the finite, limited and more or less rigid forms of will that constitute the undeveloped individuality or finite self. Insofar as this undeveloped self accommodates itself to, and cooperates with the will to universal good it is the instrument of God which God can use and will surely preserve. Insofar as it impedes it, it is the *corpus* of sin, partly racial or "original," partly individual, which must in the end be destroyed.

### *The Atonement*

It is not in his *freedom* that man sins, as Dr. Niebuhr assumes, but in his slavery. Man's freedom is divine and eternal. It is God within him, striving to create a new individual in harmony with himself. His slavery is terrestrial and temporary, for God is never entirely or finally defeated in his creative effort. Free will pursuing the good with finite intelligence may err and produce evil, but error and misfortune are not sin. Sin is the inertia of the individual, his slavery to impulse and habit. And it is its own nemesis. God suffers and strives with us to overcome it. But he does not punish. He forgives.

Pride, especially pride of knowledge and virtue, so-called "spiritual" pride, is not man's basic sin but sin's last stronghold, "the last infirmity of noble minds." And it is this last stronghold that is stormed by the sacrifice of Christ. Man may overcome sensuality and selfishness without Christ, at least in the great majority of the actions of his life. But the very overcoming builds up pride. And Dr. Niebuhr rightly sees that pride is the canker at the root of our own and every civilization. But Christ is "the power of God" unto our salvation. For we will walk with him from Galilee to Calvary our pride is shattered, our soul "ransomed" from this last enslaving clutch of sin. In the ranks of those thus redeemed are to be found that leaven which permeates the lump, the sensitive souls who keep the self-righteousness of the mass from stifling entirely society's sense of sin. And by keeping alive the consciousness of sin Christ keeps alive the consciousness of God as *other* and *higher* than ourselves though we find him within us. Thus, too, he keeps alive that hungering and thirsting after righteousness by which alone the kingdoms of this world can be transformed into the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

*Following this discussion of Dr. Niebuhr's book by Dr. Garnett, Dr. Niebuhr will next week subject to analysis. Dr. Garnett's also widely discussed current volume, 'Realistic Philosophy of Religion.'*

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