

LOUIS BOUYER
THE SPIRIT AND FORMS OF PROTESTANTISM

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CHAPTER VII – THE NAGATIVE ELEMENTS OF THE REFORMATION

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What, then, is the source of the element in Protestant theology of a God forbidden to communicate himself to his creature, of man unable, even by the divine omnipotence, to be torn from his own solitude, from the autonomy of his so arrogant humility, of a world and a God inexorably condemned to the most utter 'extrinsicism'? To the historian, the reply is obvious. The Reformers no more invented this strange and despairing universe than they found it in Scripture. It is simply the universe of the philosophy they had been brought up in, scholasticism in its decadence. If the Reformers unintentionally became heretics, the fault does not consist in the radical nature of their reform, but in its hesitation, its timidity, its imperfect vision. The structure they raised on their own principles is unacceptable only because they used uncritically material drawn from that decaying Catholicism they desired to elude, but whose prisoners they remained to a degree they never suspected. No phrase reveals so clearly the hidden evil that was to spoil the fruit of the Reformation than Luther's saying that Occam was the only scholastic who was any good. The truth is that Luther, brought up on his system, was never able to think outside the framework it imposed, while this, it is only too evident, makes the mystery that lies at the root of Christian teaching either inconceivable or absurd.

What, in fact, is the essential characteristic of Occam's thought, and of nominalism in general, but a radical empiricism, reducing all being to what is perceived, which empties out, with the idea of substance, all possibility of real relations between beings, as well as the stable subsistence of any of them, and ends by denying to the real any intelligibility, conceiving [186] God himself only as a Protean figure impossible to apprehend?

In these circumstances, a grace which produces a real change in us, while remaining purely the grace of God, becomes inconceivable. If some change is effected in us, then it comes from us, and to suppose it could come also and primarily from God amounts to confusing God with the creature. In fact, this consequence is inevitable, once we admit that we are identical with our experience. If being is reduced to action, and action to what takes place in

us, our experience is closed to anything transcendental, or else, on the assumption that transcendental could intervene, it could only do so by redi ing itself to becoming a part of ourselves.

Similarly, and as radically, it follows that grace, to remain such, that is the pure gift of God —^must always be absolutely extrinsic to us; also, faith, to remain ours, so as not to fall into that externalism that would deprive man of all that is real in rehigion, must remain shut up within us. For to suppose that dogmas defined by some external authority, that rites whose content surpasses in any way our personal experience, could be essential to our faith, would be to alienate us from ourselves, to place our hfe in something that does not, cannot, concern us, condemned, as it is, to be not only external but totally foreign to us. In such a system, every being is doomed to remain a monad impenetrable by any other, or else becomes a prey to confusion, to the dissolution, pure and simple, of its individuality.

Inside such a framework, the sovereignty of God is no more than a total independence of all that could be considered as laws of reality, whether the moral law, or the logical principles indispensable to thought. To say that God is all-powerful would amount to saying that he could make good evil and vice versa, making a being other than it is; otherwise, it means

^ Cj. Etienne Gilson, *La philosophie m moyen-ige*, Paris, 1944, pp. 638 et seq.

nothing at all. For if being is no more than a word without content, infinite being cannot be other than the indefinite, pure and simple. In such conditions, it seems quite natural that God may " declare just' the sinner, leaving him as much a sinner as before, that he may predestine some to damnation, just as he predestines others to salvation. If he did not do so, nothing would distinguish him from us, his transcendent sovereignty would disappear. Doubtless he could remain greater than us, but within the same order. He would no longer be sovereign.

From the same standpoint, we can easily see how the Word of God can remain such, only if entirely external to us. This does not only mean that its transcendence excludes any immanence of it in a tradition, an ecclesiastical authority, or even in mystical experience. It means, besides, that the Word can be given to man only through a complete emptying of his own mind; it becomes a dictamen from above, in face of which the human instrument has not even a passive part, but must be entirely effaced. The counterpart of this is that the Word is totally inexpressible in human ideas and language. Man can only receive it blindly, just as it can only speak by his mouth in making him dumb.

All these negative statements may seem so many aberrations, but they form part of the inexorable logic of nominalism in its application to the religious principles of Protestantism. Conversely, if we make use of Occam's razor, in other words, if we apply his criticism of any metaphysic at all realist, to suppose a grace that intervenes in us is to suppose that grace is only a word to designate something that is in reality part of us, or of the same nature as we are, and so capable of being made ours purely and simply. To suppose, on the other hand, a faith dependent on something outside us, still more one drawing us towards it, would be tantamount to asking us to be no longer ourselves, to destroy our own personality, to alienate us from ourselves. To suppose a God who makes us [188] really act and have being, is to suppose one who lessens himself correspondingly. To suppose a Word which could be assimilated by us, minted, without complete degradation, in the form of commands or promises not purely symbolical, provisional, liable to be instantly reversed, is to suppose a Word which has ceased to be of God, has become no more than one human word among others.

The whole tragedy of Protestantism can only be grasped when it is borne in mind that the

first Catholics to attempt its refutation, being themselves confined in the same framework of ideas as the Reformers, could not oppose them without rejecting the truth contained in what they affirmed. There was no escape from these dilemmas: either a grace which saves us by itself, and so saves us without affecting us, or a grace which saves us with our independent collaboration, so that properly speaking it is we who have to save ourselves; either a faith which is faith in our faith, in our direct experience, and ultimately in it alone, or a faith which is but a pure and simple withdrawal from ourselves; either a God who is all, while man and the world are literally nothing, or man and a world having real powers and value, though limited, and a God who is no more than the first in a series, a creature magnified, but not the creator; either a Word that is always completely foreign to us, that man can only traduce, not translate, and which has no possible meaning for him, or a word which ultimately is only his, in which he makes demands and replies to them, and dares to attribute to God what is merely his own lucubration.

The debate between Luther and Erasmus is one of the first and most remarkable examples of this impasse. It shows up clearly the inability of Catholic thinkers contemporary with the Reformers, both prisoners of a vitiated philosophy, to admit what was positive in the Reformation, and to lay bare the root of its errors. Hence there arose among Protestants the conviction of the solidity of their system and of the necessity [189] to accept it with all its consequences, to safeguard the positive intuitions to which they were so attached, and with every reason.

Even the title of the treatise of Erasmus against the Lutheran theory of justification is a warning that the problem is to be passed by unnoticed—it is called *De libero arbitrio*. The title of Luther's reply illustrates excellently the irremediable gravity of the misunderstanding that resulted; he called it *De servo arbitrio*.

Erasmus saw perfectly that Luther diverges, not only from the tradition of the Church, but from the Gospel and St. Paul himself, in creating the chimera of a salvation which should save us, without drawing us in the least from the state of sin. But, a prisoner, like Luther, of the nominalist categories, he was incapable of formulating clearly the true answer: that grace is grace, a pure gift of God, not in giving us nothing real, but in giving us, in so far as we remain dependent on it, the reality we are incapable of accumulating by ourselves. Far from seeing this, he tried to salvage the free-will of man without recourse to grace. His whole treatise aims at showing, not how grace regenerates nature, but that nature is not so deeply impaired that it cannot do something efficacious for salvation. It betrays, implicitly, a view of things as remote from the *De gratia et libero arbitrio* of St. Bernard, for example, as is that of Luther. Moreover, it is exactly the same as Luther's, except that it chooses the opposite horn of the dilemma. For both Erasmus and Luther, to say that God and man act together in justification must mean that their joint action is analogous to that of two men drawing the same load. Consequently, the more one does, the less the other; whence, for Luther, realising anew that grace does everything in salvation, it follows of necessity that man does nothing. But Erasmus desired to uphold the other aspect of tradition; that salvation is truly ours implies that we are ourselves active; it is far from covering us with a cloak that would leave us unchanged and merely passive. Hence the necessity that God [190] does not do all, that his grace is simply an aid from outside, not the source of the saving action which must come from us.

On the other hand, for St. Bernard and the whole authentic tradition, in one sense God does all, and in another man must do all, for he has to make everything his own; but he cannot — he can do absolutely nothing valid for salvation, except in complete dependence on grace. This view, we may say, must have appeared absolutely unimaginable to both Erasmus and

Luther. It is so, in fact, so long as one cannot conceive a world other than that of nominalism, as was the case for them both. In these circumstances, the way in which Erasmus himself so evidently destroyed the true Christian doctrine of grace enormously strengthened Luther's conviction that it could only be recovered by means of the negations he had embraced. These, we may judge from the *De servo arbitrio*, reach the confines of lunacy; but it has to be acknowledged that they follow strictly from the argument that Erasmus, far from curbing, did everything to further.

The true theological position, wholly consonant with revelation, is that man is himself only as he recognises his radical dependence on the Creator; but this does not mean that cFGatton is a fiction, legal or otherwise, but the most authentic of all realities. Man saved is therefore man restored by faith to the consciousness of that absolute dependence, and so recovering his life at the very source. It may seem strange, but it is undeniable that in the whole course of this unhappy controversy this view does not seem to have occurred to either of the protagonists. There lies the whole tragedy of Protestantism.

As to the extreme subjectivism implicit in Luther's formularies of belief, his own conservatism, very early aroused by the mad freaks of the Anabaptists of Münster, acted first as a counterbalance. But, at the most, it could only check it from the outside, and postpone an evolution bound to follow from the terms of the problem. That faith in s;Uvation, to be certain, must be—as is clear in Luther, and endorsed by Calvin—immediate [191] and undoubted faith in 'my' salvation, is once more a consequence of a mental climate where the spirit is enclosed in itself, and so cannot have any real certitude beyond the immediate field of its psychological experience. But this initial confusion between the personal character of our acceptance of grace and a despairing philosophical attitude was certainly carried to the extreme by what it saw opposed to it, a view equally derived from the same identification of a wholly positive personalism with a wholly negative individualism. Though this cannot be verified in the same detail as the controversy over free will, it is only too certain that the Counter-Reformation, in reply to the unrestrained subjectivism of the Reformation, adopted the easy course of an untempered authoritarianism. Nothing could more firmly and unhappily strengthen Protestants in their conviction that all personal religion must be fiercely individualistic. To exalt authority without counterbalance, to make blind submission the touchstone of orthodoxy, that could be, and was, an effective means of defending Catholics against any Protestant trend. But it was, also, one of the most effective of the negative arguments to persuade Protestants, however wrongly, that they could save one of their most cherished and rightful convictions only by rejecting, not simply authoritarianism, but the principle of authority, to the point of replacing it in practice by free thought.

The same factors are more clearly evident in the dispute over the sovereignty of God. While the whole Catholic tradition, first in Augustinianism then in Thomism, was occupied in breaking down the fallacious parallelism, so tempting to the human mind, which would make God equally the author of good and bad acts, Calvinism brought it to the point of identification. Thus, he made the doctrine of predestination unacceptable, making God the author of the damnation of the wicked as well as of the salvation of the just. Nowhere else is it so clear that the framework of nominalism is responsible for either the rejection of the mystery or its reduction to [192] absurdity. As soon as infinite being becomes confused with pure indetermination, either God is in no way, strictly speaking, the cause of our salvation, or else he is no less the cause of our damnation, since good and evil are distinguished, not by anything intrinsic, but by an arbitrary decision of the Almighty.

However, the Catholic controversialists of the time were so little able to detect the fallacy at the base of this identification that they had no other recourse than to abandon in practice

the doctrine of predestination. The Dominican, Peter de Soto, one of the first to promote a renaissance of thomism, has vividly described this collapse of the traditional teaching in the face of Protestantism.⁵⁾ This inevitably caused the Calvinist reaction, which had much in common with that of the Jansenists in the following century. For, if Catholics no longer thought themselves able to defend predestination, so clearly affirmed by St. Paul, St. John, St. Augustine, and the Councils which condemned the Pelagians, without yielding entirely to Calvinism, how could one fail to believe that Calvinism, with its implacable line of reasoning, was the only possible way to salvage this essential doctrine? But all this obviously presupposes that both sides were unable to conceive the kingship of God in other than human terms. Obviously, wherever we meet with finite authorities, purely empirical, one can be absolute only in so far as the others are nullified. If man is to possess any real value, any effective power, there is so much the less for God. But here more than anywhere else, it must be obvious that the suppositions behind the theory of the sovereignty of God prove an initial inability to conceive it aright. The concepts of a purely empirical system, such as nominalism, since they rule out any idea of a being not subject to the categories of our own experience, exclude utterly even the possibility of anything transcendental. Hence comes the adoption of various substitutes, whose inherent contradictions,

5) See his *Epistolae duae*, published as an appendix to Reginaldo's *De mente Concilii Tridentini*, Antwerp, 1706.

[193] carried to an excess of absurdity, only reveal their radical sterility. For it must be admitted, a God who remains God only so long as he creates nothing real, but only deceptive appearances, is as far from being really God as one could imagine. To set him up in a metaphysical wilderness, annihilating, in principle, all other beings, is to grant him an entirely illusory sovereignty, since it can only subsist if exercised over absolute nonentity.

To pass to the theology of the Word, the persistence with which Karl Barth attacks the thomist principle of the analogia entis is particularly revealing, both of the blindness at the base of the entire polemical structure of Protestantism, and that of Catholics in the sixteenth century, which contributed to make it incorrigible.

For Barth, to speak of an 'analogy of being', and to make it the principle of the whole of theology, is to admit that the words of man and the Word of God belong to the same order, that human thought and the data of revelation are capable of harmonisation as components on the same level; thus to admit the possibility of constructing a dogmatic synthesis in which the thought of man and the revelation of God would be so closely fused that the human element would simply assimilate to itself the revealed data.⁶⁾

But whoever understands the real meaning and scope of analogy in the thomist system, can see at once that this interpretation confuses it with one of the two possible errors it was precisely designed to avoid. At the same time, anyone who knows the history of scholastic nominalism, which persisted all through the sixteenth century in its claim to be the heir of the great medieval tradition of theology, whereas it was in fact its destroyer, realises thereby the sole apparent justification for Earth's extraordinary misconception. Catholic writers are certainly to be blamed for it, but only through their subservience to fallacies that Protestants did not dream of criticising, Barth least of all.

6) *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I/I, pp. 40, 123, 175, etc.

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The analogy of being is only a philosophical theory which enables us to deny both that the Word of God is the same in nature with the human word, and so reducible to it, and also that it is without any relation with the human word, and so completely inassimilable by it, totally unable to bring about any real interchange. The theologian who has thoroughly grasped the thomist doctrine (which in fact does more than systematise accurately the practice of the Church since the prophets and apostles) will not imagine that he can understand and manipulate any enunciation of the divine Word as he could those of his own mind. Nor will he conclude that the Word of God has to remain an unresolved enigma, a symbol impossible to decipher. Knowing that God made all things as a reflection of his own thoughts, and the human mind as a reflection of his own word, he will strive, his mind illumined by faith, to open himself to the mysteries God reveals, not confining them in the framework of his own ideas, but transposing and enlarging these, not destroying their value in their own order, but transcending the limits of mere reason—a real elevation, not a collapse into the subrational. Thus, the supernatural is received by the mind enlightened and elevated by faith, not as darkening its natural lights, but by the acquiescence of the human mind in its invasion by the Spirit of God; in this unique experience, it recognises both that it is rapt from itself and taken back by Him who had made it for Himself, in His own image.

All the same, nothing has contributed more—and still does so today—to confirm Protestants like Barth in the conviction that the analogy of being is really only a univocity which reduces the divine Word to the level of the human and binds it up in the human word, than the practical nominalism of so many Catholic theologians, even if thomist in principle. Any theological system which aims, not at admitting the mystery, setting it in place, pointing out its demands on human thought, but, albeit unconsciously, at reducing it, dissolving it, digesting it, as it were, into the ready-made categories [195] posed to be adequate for it, can only corroborate the assurance of Protestants that there is no alternative other than a divine Word, inexpressible, wholly incapable of assimilation, and a Word immersed in the human, acceptable only as reduced to the measure of man and conformed to his categories.

All this does not exhaust the matter. We have ascertained that the Reformation did not derive any of the negative and unacceptable aspects of any of its principles from any necessity inherent in its positive principles, considered strictly in their religious content; further, that the cause lies in the uncritical application by the Reformers of the barren framework of a decadent system. To this must be added that none of the consequences of this misapplication is a genuine creation of Protestantism. All the 'heresies' Protestantism may have fostered, far from being its creations, even creations warped in their nature by the dead weight of a routine, unreformed system, appear already to be taking shape in the nominalist thinkers before the Reformation.

Whether we take the theory of extrinsic justification, or the completely subjectivist view of faith (shutting faith up in itself, instead of seeing it as the means enabling the human mind to be drawn to God and to transcend itself), or that of the sovereignty of God confused with an arbitrariness fundamentally due to anthropomorphism, or a conception of the Word of God that both opposes it to any ecclesiastical institution and makes it incomprehensible, and even incapable of foraiulation—none of this is a Protestant innovation. All these strange, in a sense unhealthy, monstrous conceptions, to be so soon applied to the religious principles of the Reformation, disfiguring them at the outset, had been elaborated long before the Reformation. The Reformers merely took them over as they found them.

Occam, and following him Biel, thought out the idea, without precedent in tradition, that justification, properly speaking, consists only in the acceptance of man by God, and that this [196] acceptance in itself is independent of any change in the person justified. If they go on to

admit that justification is accompanied by regeneration, by the restoration of charity to the soul of the justified, they deny any connection between the two. They affirm the fact, since it seems to be contained in Scripture and tradition, but maintain that God could also 'justify' the sinner and leave him in his sin.7)

At the same time, for them and for the whole school of Occam, faith adheres to the truths contained in Scripture and proposed by the Church, but does so not for any objective reason beyond itself, whatever one might think. Their whole line of argument goes to show that such a motive, in fact, could only be illusory. Never has so strict a 'fideism' been put forward; never, in other words, has faith been so conceived as depending entirely on itself, as being its own justification. If, however, as the Reformers were to do later, they allow it a content already fixed, derived from Scripture or the Church, that is because what they actually envisage is Christian faith; there is nothing at all in their principles in favour of this more than any other faith, nor, in fact, anything that justifies in the least its apparent possibility of orientation to an object above itself, outside the consciousness of the believer.

Moreover, the idea of a *potentia absoluta* is the key to the whole Occamist theology, which amounts to saying that it is the negation of any possible theology. In such a system, God is only God in so far as he is beyond the true and the false, good and evil. Truth, falsehood, good, evil, are no more than hypotheses he has actually adopted; there is no reason why he should not have taken them in the contrary sense, or why he should be prevented from reversing them.8)

7) Cf. P. Vignaux, *Justification et predestination au 14^{me} siècle*, Paris, 1934, pp. 119-22, on Occam. Feckes, *Gabrielis Biel quaestiones de justificatione*, Münster, 1929.

8) Cf. Gilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 653-4 for Occam and Biel; also Humbert, *Origines de la philosophie moderne*.

No more suitable expressions could be found to add the finishing touch to the system worked out by Barth with the aim of withdrawing the Word of God from what he considers its contamination by the words of men. Nothing, either, seems more radically opposed to the scriptural idea of the 'truth', that is to say, God's fidelity to his own Word, or of the sanctity of God, which the Bible is far from reducing to the level of morality; on the contrary, it raises 'justice' in its most exacting form, to the centre of the 'sacred', so that ultimately the two are inseparable.

Finally, whence comes this opposition of the Word of God, in its scriptural form, to all the other authorities, to tradition, to the magisterium, to ecclesiastical authority as well as human reason, while at the same time its affirmations are said to be incapable of 'harmonising' with any truth acquired by other means, the result being either the idea of a double truth, or the idea that truth is unattainable by the human mind? This opposition is most characteristic of the nominalist theology, perpetually balanced, as it is, between an inevitable agnosticism and the argument from scriptural authority as a *Deus ex machina*. As to the latter, nominalism itself shows how illusory it is, since the initial assumptions of this philosophy are carried to their extreme consequences, without any but a verbal deference to what is most prominent in the teaching of Scripture, while this remains a dead letter as soon as it comes into conflict with the philosophy.

Our conclusion from this chapter is that the negative, 'heretical' aspect of the Reformation neither follows from its positive principles, nor is it a necessary consequence of their development or vindication, but appears simply as a survival, within Protestantism, of what was most vitiated and corrupt in the Catholic thought of the close of the Middle Ages.

This latter point, the utter corruption of Christian thought in nominalist theology, quite unaitically retained and applied by all the ' orthodox' Protestant thinkers, should by now be thoroughly clear. But the matter is so important that we must dwell on it a little further, and define the relation existing between adherence to the Catholic faith and acceptance of one or other of the various systems of philosophy and theology erected for its explanation and defence.

Contrary to the opinion of many Protestants, Barthians in particular, the Church neither is nor can be bound up) with any intellectual system as such. But, precisely to safeguard, not for her own sake, but for the sake of the revelation entrusted to her, the necessary liberty of the divine Word in respect to the human, it is her duty to pass judgment on systems which offer a framework for the truths of religion. If, then, the Church is mistrustful of systems of a nominalist type, while greatly in favour of a realist system like thomism, without identifying itself with it exclusively, that is not to involve herself in controversy on purely human concerns. She is so, because certain systems of thought, such as nominalism, make the mystery of Christianity, the mystery of a God Creator and Redeemer, either inconceivable or absurd. Once this system is admitted, as it was by everyone at the end of the Middle Ages, either we reject the God, ' Creator and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ', or, if we still admit him, we do so on such terms that he appears a monster repugnant both to common sense and to moral feeling, affronting in either way the truest of our instincts, God's trace left intact in his creature, even when impaired and blinded by sin. Such a system can only be condemned by the Church; the true reform to be unceasingly sought within her body should be to work unremittingly to eradicate it—a thing, unfortunately, that never occurred to the Reformers of the sixteenth century.

Other systems, though human and so limited, incapable, therefore, of comprising all the perfection of the revealed deposit, admit the possibility of mystery. Not only do they bow before it, but they welcome it, since their chief aim is absolute docility to the whole of the real. In this aspect alone does die Church give them its encouragement, without overlooking the fact that they are human and imperfect, [200] necessarily inadequate to the expression of the Word of God in it, fulness It may be said that it is just because they recognise it themselves, not only in an introductory rhetoric, but in reality, at their very heart and centre, that the Church receives them. In blessing thomism, far from raising up a human system as judge of the Word of God, she blesses its very submission to this Word. The tragedy of Protestantism, on the other hand, we see to be its remaining a close prisoner of a system which prevents God communicating with us, or unconsciously claims to dictate to him what to say at the very moment it aims at restoring the sovereignty of his Word.