

## ARTICLE IX

CULMANN'S CHRISTIAN ETHICS.<sup>1</sup>

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This work has been before the German public some time. But it deserves the attention of American scholars also, partly because of its unquestionable excellences, and partly because of the ability with which it advocates certain extravagant theosophic views. In spirit it is reverent and evangelical. But it blames all precedent works on ethics with stopping at half-ways; and it assumes to possess the key to higher constructions of Christianity than are found in ordinary orthodoxy. In a word, it claims to be more orthodox than the orthodox themselves.

The author was a speculative theosoph of the school of Schelling as transformed by the evangelical thinking of Baader and Schaden. Though a faithful pastor, he was more a theologian than a preacher. Of his chief work, *Ethics*, he completed only the first volume. The second, which is posthumous, is but an outline, and is supplemented by five very able theological essays. Dr. Culmann died as Protestant pastor at Spircs, October, 1863, at the early age of thirty-eight. His name is still fragrant in the memory of his flock and of his colleagues. One of the latter prefaces the posthumous volume with a beautiful appreciation of his character, showing, among other things, how that, with every added day of his life, he rose to a more deeply-rooted and a more joyous conviction that in Christ lie hidden all the choicest treasures of wisdom.

The spirit and characteristics of Culmann's ethics may be pretty fairly judged of from the following uninterrupted presentation of his chief positions:

Christian ethics is based on the inter-relations of God and man. These relations are generally conceived of too outwardly, after the analogy of a human parent to his son, or of an educator to his pupil. This view of these relations is only rationalistico-theistic, but it is far higher than the pantheistic. In Schleiermacher's pantheistic theology God has not even so much objectivity as an educator to a pupil; instead of a living God we have here only the human God-consciousness from which to construct religion. The inter-relation of God and man is much deeper. The scriptures imply this by designating it as a *bridal* relation, and by calling us members of Christ's body, and branches upon the vine, Christ. Here the

<sup>1</sup> Die Christliche Ethik von Ph. Theodor Culmann. 2 Bände. Stuttgart Vol. XXX. No. 118.

love is no longer a matter of mere consciousness, but it rises to a reciprocal *essence-interchange*. It is not Platonic but marital. Man does not here love God merely from a dread distance; but God enters into him with his own divine essence. The bond of communion is kept up on the part of God, not merely by revelations in word, idea, and example, but by an impartation of the divine essence to man. It is a *vinculum substantiale* of two organically inter-connected existences. This view alone expresses the full objective sense of the scriptures. Though extant in contemporary dogmatics, its scientific establishment is a task of the future.

Man being made for such a relation, it is the task of ethics to show how he is to remain in it when already there, as in the case of Adam, and what is the goal to be reached. In respect to fallen man, its task is the same, with the addition of showing how the broken relation is to be re-established by repentance and faith. It is also to show that man's capability for appropriating the divine essence lies in his innate God-likeness. This God-likeness is much more than mere personal consciousness and freedom. God, the other factor of the relation, is to be conceived of as imparting his substantiality to man. And then are to be shown what changes are hereby wrought in man, and how he is thus brought to his God-set goal. Any system of ethics, therefore, which claims to be more than merely rationalistico-theistic must (1) show man to be more than a mere free, conscious ego, (2) utilize the central idea of a divine essence-impartation to man, and (3) describe this divine essence, and show how its organic union with the individual is affected by appropriation.

But to enter into details. God may be related to man in three ascending stages, (1) as permeating man, (2) as by-dwelling with man, (3) as indwelling in man. It is at the third stage only that the central relation of essence-impartation between God and man takes place. At the lowest stage, God is as external to man as a tree or an animal. But man is called to seek after God, if haply he may find him. If he does truly seek him, then God may exist in him in a specifically higher manner than hitherto. At first he knows God, ideally, as permeating his thoughts; he now knows God as everywhere meeting and helping him, as dwelling with him. If he remains faithful here, he will then rise to the full indwelling of God in him, that is, to an essence-communion with God. Then is verified the word of John: "He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." This is a specifically higher indwelling of God in man and of man in God than the natural indwelling, as expressed in the words: "In him we live and move and have our being." To illustrate: A man may dive under the water and live and move there a longer or shorter while; the water surrounds and encloses him. But he does not live in the water in as high a degree as the fish, which can disport itself in it as in its own life-element. God's substantial being is man's life-element.

The prevalent ethical view, that happiness, bliss, joy, spring from a felt

harmony of our being with God and the universe, is far from adequate. Bliss arises solely where the Spirit of God streams *realiter* over into man as a divine gift, and thus awakens enthusiasm. It is only when enthusiasm enters that real joy results, as was illustrated at Pentecost. Here alone are delight and blessedness, and that *raptus* of divine love which joins the enraptured one with the Enrapturer, and constantly heightens and intensifies the union, thus accomplishing that essence-interchange which alone deserves to be called love. Ordinary rationalistico-theistic ethics is thus far below the truth in making love spring from a felt harmony of subject and object. This harmony is more than ideal. To illustrate: The drinker feels himself in harmony with the wine when he sees it before him, but in a still higher degree when he drinks it, and in a yet higher degree still when he feels its exhilarating effects; for here only does the wine really dwell in him. So in the relation of God to man. It is only when the divine substantiality *realiter* indwells in man that the joy of real love springs up.

The more prevalent ethical view of the body, that it is merely an organ of the spirit, is utterly defective. The body is not only the organ of the spirit, but also its *nourishing substantial basis*, from which it feeds itself, as the light from the oil.<sup>1</sup> For every spirit, says Böhme, eats of its mother (*mater, materia*). This view gives the body a real essence-communion with the spirit, and thus makes the relation much deeper. The body is not a mere instrument of the spirit; it is *essential* to the spirit. In fact the spirit cannot exist at all without a corporeality. Hence the necessity of its perpetuated existence. The spirit can be immortal only in that it either retains its present corporeal substratum, or receives another in its stead. That the latter takes place, every Christian knows very well, seeing that by baptism and the eucharist and by the faith-life which follows them, he is incorporated into the church, the mystical body of the Resuscitated. When his present body falls away in death, then he straightway stands as a blooming branch on the vine, Christ, and obtains here a full compensation. But if any one neglects his opportunity and does not lay hold upon the corporeality of Christ, then when his present body is, as it were, snatched from beneath his feet by death, his spirit plunges at once into the abyss and finds here, in the lake of fire and

<sup>1</sup> Materialists will applaud this sentiment with both hands, and say that it is precisely what they teach, save that they are consequent in going on to the farther inference that when the body falls away, then the soul also ceases to be. And in fact this would be the case were it not that there is both a heavenly and a hellish corporeality, beyond the present one. The former was realized once and for all by Christ at his resurrection, and may be appropriated by whosoever will; the latter is the lake of fire. Every soul, on throwing off its flesh-body, finds itself with inner necessity forthwith clothed upon with one or the other of these hypercarnate corporealities.

brimstone, the corporeality suited to its nature. This view alone accounts for the necessity of the holy eucharist. For if the body is merely an organ for the communication of the spirit with the outer world, why need we to partake of the body and blood of the Resuscitated, and thereby appropriate to ourselves a transfigured corporeality, seeing that we have no need of such a body for this as yet untransfigured world? But if the body is not a mere instrument, but that above-mentioned *plus*, then follows as a natural sequence that, for the regenerated spirit-life of the Christian, there must be prepared also as its nourishing basis, the corresponding death-proof corporeality of the Resuscitated.

Ordinary ethics is also erroneous in treating of men as normally and originally existing in the two sexes and in diverse nationalities. The fact is Adam did not come into existence in a child-state, but as a matured and perfected creature. This alone was to be his normal condition. The original plan did not contemplate the creation of woman. Eve was created only in anticipation of the fact that sin was about to enter the world. It was simply in view of the impending fall into sin, that it was "not good" for the man to be alone. And national diversities are due to the criminal *attentat* at Babel.

Ordinary ethics is too indefinite as to the nature of the perfection which is the goal of the moral life. This perfection is no other than the above-mentioned realistic organic union of the person with the substantiality of God. At Pentecost God stood no longer as the mere lawgiver of Sinai, nor as the mere teacher of the Mount, but as in fact ready to pour out the realistic essence-fulness of his Spirit into the disciples. He caused,—to make use of a pregnant expression—the imponderable *fluidum* of his Spirit to stream over into the disciples,—which was something unspeakably higher than all his precedent revelations in word, law, idea, and moral example. With this climax-act he reached at last that to which everything precedent had pointed. In the eucharist he set the disciples into organic bodily communion with himself, and then on the basis of this somatic union, raised them at Pentecost into spiritual communion, so that they constituted now not merely one body, but also one spirit with the Lord.

The usual ethical view of the central moral motive is neither clear nor adequate. A thorough analysis of man as the divine image, shows that man is made to *live in God*, with as obvious a necessity as the structure of a fish shows that it is made to live in the water, and that, in the structure of this God-likeness, he has the impelling force, the motive, to this life in God. The motive to the moral is, consequently, not merely an indefinite consciousness of a lack, but a definite consciousness of a need, of realistic union with God.

The common ethical view conceives of man's dominion over nature very crudely. A higher Christian philosophy teaches that previously to the

creation of man — either before or during the six creative days — there took place the fall of Satan, and consequently that man entered into life *le lendemain d'une bataille* (on the heels of a catastrophe) as St. Martin says; and furthermore that, though the world at its creation was good, yet it was not complete and perfected, and that man's dominating over nature involved the colossal task of transforming this crude natural cosmos into a transfigured spiritual cosmos.

In regard to the moral goal, it is the task of true ethics to show, (1) that the effect of the overflowing of the divine substantiality into man, is to fill him with all joy and bliss, and to initiate him into a knowledge of the thoughts and plans of God long before they are objectively realized, so that he becomes in fact a *prophet* in the fullest sense of the word; (2) that the realistic presence of God in man and the progressive transformation of the human into the divine eventuates in an inner freedom and boundlessness of power in man, so that he becomes not merely figuratively but truly a *king*; and (3) that this presence of God in man is founded and intensified solely in virtue of the constantly renewed renunciation and sacrifice of the selfhood of the creature to God, and hence is conditioned upon the central act of all *priesthood*.

The traditional treatment of virtue is far from clear. Virtue in its most general sense is a preparedness for something. God wills that certain things be realized by his creatures. Man's inborn and acquired preparedness for this work, is his virtue. But as God is an inexhaustibly fresh-flowing spring of thoughts and purposes, hence he has capacitated his creatures for a correspondingly variable manner of obedience. The usually-given virtues do not exhaust the whole of man's capability. It would therefore be better for ethics to develop with all possible fulness the one central virtue-principle — active, loving co-operation with the divine will — and let the anatomizing of it into a greater or smaller number of particular virtues fall into the background.

The prevalent ethical view of sin is far from adequate. Sin is not simply a formal disobedience, but also the eating of a forbidden fruit. The eating of this wisely prohibited substance laid the ground for a satanic by-dwelling with man. But this by-dwelling is by no means as yet an indwelling. Hence the redeemableness of man. Man is able to resist the development of the implanted satanic principle, though he cannot himself eliminate it from his nature. He may yield to its sway, and thus let the satanic by-dwelling become an indwelling, so that he ends in being at one with the devil. But if he resist the implanted evil and lay hold on proffered redemption, he will then rise to oneness with God. As by the eating of a satanic substance a satanic enthusiasm was generated, so by the eating of the divine substance of the *corpus Christi*, is generated a divine enthusiasm. Herein lies the significance of the eucharist.

The ethical view of the fall into sin needs careful revision. This fall

was not merely a perversion of the will, but also an ungodly in-birth of man into the present order of things. This condition can be reversed only by what the scriptures call a re-birth. This re-birth commences in a divine spirit-impartment. This spirit-impartment is not final, but is to be followed by ever renewed higher impartations. This spirit is not a merely qualitative magnitude that needs only, as a germ, to be developed, but also a quantitative one, which may be communicated in different degrees. The significance of this thought for ethics is very great. The usual view locates the chief event, regeneration, at the very beginning of the new life, and gives it too much the character of a finality, thus depriving the subsequent life of its greatest stimulus to growth — the faith-hunger for fresh impartations of the Spirit. The ultimate goal is actually reached when man by successive receptions of the divine principle is so transformed that the Spirit which at first merely breathed in him as an impulse, now dwells in him as a second personality, making him into an oracle of God and a brother of the holy prophets. Here man becomes a "possessed" of the Holy Ghost, as at the opposite pole of development he becomes a "possessed" of the devil.

Such is a brief and rather bluntly put synopsis of the chief points at which Dr. Culmann's work takes issue with the more generally prevalent positions in Christian ethics. Their bare statement will be to most readers their sufficient conviction of unsoundness and crudity. But so hasty a conclusion would do the work real injustice. In the ethereal atmosphere of theosophy, ordinary distinctions become wavering, and the commonest words acquire an elasticity of meaning which renders their measurement by ordinary notions very unsatisfactory, if not unsafe. Not unfrequently we here find that in overthrowing what seems to us a palpable absurdity, we have simply overthrown a straw-man of our own constructing. Our author did not mean it in such a sense. The absurdity was not so much in the position itself as in our hasty understanding of it. This is especially the case with the work of Dr. Culmann. It needs to be studied as a whole, before finally sentenced. And in this case no one will regret the pains taken. For whatever be its fundamental errors, it is admitted on all hands to abound in brilliant speculations, and to be redolent of a very earnest Christian mysticism.