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DID RITSCHL'S CRITICS READ RITSCHL?

by CLARK M. WILLIAMSON

IN our first two numbers for 1970 there appeared Professor Leonard De Moor's article on "The Ritschlian View of Revelation", which was read with special interest by Professor Clark M. Williamson, of the Department of Theology in Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis. He expresses the conviction that it is high time that Ritschl was reassessed for our own day, and he makes the following contribution to such a reassessment.

INTRODUCTION

THE purpose of this paper is, as its title indicates, to set forth what its author understands to be a somewhat different understanding of the theological work of Albrecht Ritschl than is held by most, if not all, of Ritschl's critics. Philip Hefner, in his recent book, *Faith and the Vitalities of History*, raises the issue of the range and adequacy of the critical analyses of Ritschl's work, pointing out that the secondary material is dominated by a concern with Ritschl's ethical and philosophical reflection whereas approximately two-thirds of Ritschl's own work was historical in nature.¹ And Hefner proceeds to unearth much of the unexplored Ritschl material, to reinterpret Ritschl's work in light of his concern with objectivity in the relativities of history, and to criticize the present-day retreat from the vitalities of history. This paper is a response to Hefner's appeal for a new look at Ritschl, but unlike Hefner's book this paper shall re-examine the systematic and ethical aspects of Ritschl's work in light of the new critical stance upon Ritschl's critics with which Hefner has provided us.

By way of introduction a note of caution must be injected into the discussion. Because of the shift in the prevailing theological wind which has occurred between Ritschl's day and ours, a two-fold danger in interpreting Ritschl has to be avoided. It is with the failure to avoid one of these dangers that some of Ritschl's critics must be charged; it is the attempt to avoid the other which must be made in this paper. Both of these dangers result from the

¹ Hefner, *Faith and the Vitalities of History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 5.

more realistic, profound, and penetrating doctrine of man which the theology of our time has made available to us. The first danger is that of reading into Ritschl a more shallow understanding of the problems of human existence than was, in all fairness, actually his. The other danger is that of reading into Ritschl a more profound grasp of the human situation than was actually his. For example, whereas Ritschl's concept of sin as mistrust and indifference seems to go deeper than Barth's claim that for Ritschl "sin is deed and only deed",² on the other hand, Ritschl's understanding of the human predicament as that of the conflict between spirit and nature is not as penetrating as the more recent understanding of the human predicament as arising from the conflict within spirit itself *qua* spirit. The frustration of the spirit, in attempting to extricate itself from the confinements of a capricious and mechanistically conceived natural order for Ritschl, is a frustration which does not seem to be of the same depth as Tillich's account of basic anxiety as an anxiety which "belongs to existence itself".³ The frustration of which Ritschl speaks belongs to spirit only to the extent to which spirit is subordinated to nature. Under the conditions of the Kingdom of God Ritschl conceives this frustration as no longer existing, because the spiritual personality transcends the world, exercising lordship and dominion over it.⁴

BARTH AND NIEBUHR

Barth interprets Ritschl as importing Kantian motifs into Christian thought, but Barth correctly notes that it is Kant's understanding of the "practical ideal of life" which is the determinative thing for Ritschl.⁵ That is, Barth holds that Ritschl's abandoning of all claims to knowledge which could not be rendered intelligible within the Kantian framework is characteristic of Ritschl's system only if we

hold up beside it the positive determination with which on the one hand he apprehends and affirms this practical ideal of life as such, and with which on the other he makes the interpretation of Christianity, the Bible and particularly the Reformation, serve the founding and strengthening of this ideal.⁶

² Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl* (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 395. Hereafter referred to as *Protestant Thought*.

³ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 39.

⁴ Albrecht Ritschl, *Instruction in the Christian Religion*, trans. by Alice M. Swing in Albert T. Swing's *The Theology of Albrecht Ritschl* (New York: Longmans, 1901), pp. 178-179.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought*, p. 391.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Barth goes on, however, to discount completely the Christian referents of which Ritschl makes use and instead puts forth the thesis that the practical ideal of the life lived according to reason "was his chief concern".⁷ It is quite clear that Barth understands Ritschl as making things Christian subservient to things Kantian. Ritschl's ideal of life, which Barth says was "the very epitome of the national-liberal German bourgeois of the age of Bismarck",⁸ is served rather than modified by the Christian trappings with which Ritschl surrounds it. Translated, this presumably means that the essentially anthropocentric emphasis of the Kantian ethic, in which the autonomy of the will (Ritschl: spiritual independence) and the philosophical distinction between "a natural system to which the will is subject" and "a natural system which is subject to a will",⁹ with the preference going to the latter, is imported wholesale into the Christian faith and ultimately destroys the theocentric emphasis which is the basis of the Christian faith. Barth does not explicitly make this particular point, but it seems to be implied in the passages quoted above.

Barth continues his criticism of Ritschl by remarking that with him, "reconciliation, to put it baldly, means the realized ideal of human life".¹⁰ Although Barth recognizes Ritschl's emphasis on the necessity of utter trust, faith, humility, and patience he regards these clearly as means to rather than as modifications upon man's "spiritual dominion over the world".¹¹ This is the almost strident note which he rings throughout his chapter on Ritschl. He claims that justification is merely the "guarantee and realization, apprehended in faith, of this ideal of life".¹² And, finally, the "meaning of an apologetics of Christianity" is "to demonstrate this significance of Christianity for the realization of the ideal of human life— . . .".¹³

It must be admitted that there is much in Ritschl to give the impression which Barth has obtained. Indeed, Ritschl's completely flat-footed and explicit way of saying what he means gives Barth all the ammunition which he needs for his position because a

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

⁹ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (London: Longmans, 1959), p. 134.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought*, p. 393.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 395.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

choice quotation is always available to him. Barth has got the situation somewhat reversed. To be sure, there is an anthropocentric element in Ritschl; one wonders if any soteriological theology fails to have such an element—especially if it is honest. After all, we may ask, who is saved? The thesis which we will set forth later, however, will be that the meaning of life which is available to man in Ritschl's theology and which is correlative to his independence of nature comes *via* subordination to God in trust: *i.e.*, man is lord of nature by virtue of being servant of God. Hence, although the anthropocentric element is not removed, as I would contend that it cannot be removed from a soteriological faith, Barth's criticism must be modified. This point will be quite clear, however, only after the succeeding discussion.

H. Richard Niebuhr's criticism of Ritschl's theology is at once more sympathetic and, perhaps by virtue of this, also more penetrating than that of Barth. Niebuhr begins by noting that Ritschl's claim that religious judgments are value judgments is a "limitation of theology to the point of view of faith in the God of Jesus Christ."¹⁴ He relates this understanding as a renewal of the Reformation statement of Luther to the effect that ". . . the two, faith and God, hold close together. Whatever then thy heart clings to . . . and relies upon, that is properly thy god."¹⁵

Niebuhr certainly interprets Ritschl correctly when he notes that the upshot of the theory of value-judgments is, in part, that Christian affirmations about God, Jesus Christ, etc., are significant only within a Christian context, *i.e.*, within the Christian faith.¹⁶ The Christian God is not One in whom mathematicians delight but One who evokes from the faithful a response of joy and trust. "This God is always 'my God,' 'our Good,' 'our beginning' and 'our end'."¹⁷

Niebuhr is also generous in indicating that Ritschl's emphasis on value judgments or his "faith method" had many beneficial effects:

It indicated why the intellectualistic approach in theology always remained religiously unsatisfactory, why it led away from the religious community, why it tended to bring forth neither prayer nor repentance, neither adoration nor reformation.¹⁸

¹⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: MacMillan, 1941), p. 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

This is obviously a more sensitive understanding of Ritschl than Barth has presented.

Niebuhr's criticism of Ritschl, having stated his appreciation of Ritschl's contributions, is that Ritschl does the same thing of which he himself accused traditional theological method, i.e., of jumping "from a standpoint outside of Christianity to a standpoint in Christianity . . . without awareness of the leap."¹⁹ Specifically, Niebuhr claims that Ritschl set forth a value-judgment which was extraneous to the Christian faith and which has a cultural and anthropocentric focus rather than a Christian and theocentric focus. Dealing with Ritschl's statements to the effect that man is prior to nature in worth, Niebuhr claims that Ritschl

now posits a human will and desire directed not toward God but toward the maintenance of man's superiority over nature; so he interprets the value of God to man through man's evaluation of himself as this appears in his self-comparison not with God but with nature.²⁰

Presumably this means that Ritschl formulates a prior value judgment as to the worth of man over against nature which becomes normative for and in terms of which the Christian value judgment about man's relation to God is justified and its relevance stated. Niebuhr objects to this on the same ground as Barth also objects to Ritschl, i.e., on the basis that it gives to theology an anthropocentric orientation in which man's "confidence in his own value rather than faith in God" is the methodological procedure by means of which one states his theological position.²¹

Niebuhr, like Barth then, considers Ritschl to modify the Christian faith in the direction of an anthropocentric concern with man, i.e., to make God serve man's end. Also, like Barth, he does *not* raise the possible interpretation that what Ritschl means is that man can only realize a meaningful existence by virtue of those revelatory and salvatory acts of God in history which are celebrated by the Christian faith and the chief of which is the event of Jesus Christ Himself.

KANT'S SECOND CRITIQUE

In beginning this discussion of Ritschl it must be admitted that his critics are correct in noting that Ritschl interprets and delineates the relevance of the Christian faith by means of a set of notions which he derives ultimately from Kant, although some of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

his epistemological ideas come to him *via* Lotze. What we shall essentially be arguing in this section of the paper, however, is that Ritschl's critics incompletely understand this set of notions as they finally take form in Ritschl's own thought, i.e., specifically that they consider the Christian faith, for Ritschl, as giving to man the power to bring nature under the subjugation of his instrumentalities and thus as satisfying his egocentricity. At this point some of Ritschl's critics, Barth in particular, make note of the fact that this freedom *from* nature is equivalent with freedom *to* realize an ideal self-end. Here, however, Barth contends that Ritschl identifies man's end with God's end thus again emphasizing the anthropocentric note. Whereas this paper contends that man's successful extrication from the system of nature, unless it entailed for Ritschl a commitment to another system (the Kingdom of God) which differs from the Newtonian nature system in being moral-practical rather than natural-mechanical and which is considered expressive of God's will and purpose for the world, would not in itself make available to man the fulness or completeness of life which his own self-understanding as a "spiritual" or "personal" being requires. And this commitment to the Kingdom of God entails a considerable if not a radical modification of the anthropocentric emphasis which will be seen to be the centre of the Kantian analysis of morality. Before we undertake this investigation of Ritschl, however, it is necessary to recast, somewhat generally, those notions from the Kantian system which have special relevance to the thought of Ritschl.

To attempt a bold generalization of the Kantian mode of thought appears to be the most useful way to begin this discussion. Epistemologically, or for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, this generalization takes the following form: percepts without concepts are blind; concepts without percepts are empty. Axiologically, or for the *Critique of Practical Reason*, it can be specified as follows: objects of desire, apart from having received a determination from a general form of the will, cause man to be blindly impulsive; a general determination of the will, i.e., a moral law, without an object, is practically ineffective (empty).

Briefly, then, we shall attempt to show some of the notions in Kant's second *Critique* which became important for Ritschl and in terms of which he delineated the Christian faith. Then in our discussion of Ritschl we will attempt to show how this very delineation itself required a modification of this set of notions.

Kant asks two guiding questions in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Generally, these questions are asked in order that by their

answers it will be shown "that there is pure practical reason,"²² i.e., that pure reason can be practical. The first question is "whether pure reason of itself alone suffices to determine the will, or whether it can be a ground of determination only as dependent on empirical conditions."²³ The second question is that of freedom. That is, "can we now discover means of proving that this proper 'freedom' does in fact belong to the human will?"²⁴ An affirmative answer to the second question implies the availability of an affirmative answer to the first. That is, granted freedom or autonomy of the will, "then it will not only be shown that pure reason can be practical, but that it alone, and not reason empirically limited, is undubitably practical . . ."²⁵

Hence Kant's desire to show that there is pure practical reason necessarily involves him in the attempt to show that the empirically affected practical reason makes presumptuous claims which involve it in the loss of freedom (heteronomy) and therefore necessitate its being restricted within its proper bounds. At this point it must be noted that it is only by separating the practical reason from the theoretical reason that Kant can ascertain the reality of the concept "freedom" and assure the meaningfulness of man's "spiritual" (practical-moral) life. The notions of God, freedom, and immortality, which were only problematic in the first *Critique* and which Kant considers essential to man's moral life, find a certainty in the second, although they still do not have the status of such theoretical notions as that of causality to which an objectively real status can be ascribed.

By freedom (which for our purposes is the more important notion at this point) what Kant means is self-determination. For example, he defines the will as a

faculty either to produce objects corresponding to ideas, or to determine ourselves to the effecting of such objects (whether the physical power is sufficient or not); that is, to determine our causality.²⁶

That is, it is a faculty either to produce objects corresponding to our ideas or to determine ourselves to the effecting of such objects.

Kant's emphasis on freedom as over against heteronomy receives some clarity from a consideration of his first theorem, which is: "All practical principles which presuppose an object (matter) of

²² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 87.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

the faculty of desire as the ground of determination of the will are empirical, and can furnish no practical laws."²⁷ Taken in the strictest logical sense what this theorem means is not that principles which are also practical laws cannot have a material element to which they are synthetically related, but that a principle derived from the consideration of material desires cannot be generalized into a moral law. Briefly, there is a difference between the material of a principle (which is also a practical law) and a material principle (which can furnish no practical law but which must remain a subjective maxim). This is the most crucial distinction necessary to be kept in mind in order to make sense of the aspect of Kant's ethics with which we are dealing. What Kant says in this theorem and what becomes more evident as the second *Critique* progresses is that if a rational being is to regard the maxims of his conduct as universal laws, he cannot do so by considering the material or objective intent of the maxim. Rather, he can only accomplish this by considering the principle prescribed to the particular situation by the general (formal) determination of the will by the moral law. This does not, as can be readily seen, exclude from the realm of ethics such things as material or empirical considerations but it does insist that morality is dependent on freedom and self-determination.

Kant is concerned to show that non-rational attempts to provide grounds for ethical action and decision involve man in a transcendent and hence illusory use of his reason in the practical sphere. The illusion of which we speak here is the only moral illusion there is for Kant—that of heteronomy. To let material principles guide us in our conduct is to base ethical action on rules which are merely subjective (in the sense of being individualistic and not susceptible to generalization into the form of principles) and hence divisive rather than unifying. No moral order, no Kingdom of ends (*Metaphysics of Morals*) or Kingdom of God (*Critique of Practical Reason*) can be constructed on the basis of material, empirical principles.

This leads us to Kant's fourth theorem that

The *autonomy* of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws, of all duties which conform to them; on the other hand, *heteronomy* of the elective will not only cannot be the basis of any obligation, but is, on the contrary, opposed to the principle thereof, and to the morality of the will.²⁸

By autonomy and freedom Kant means the self-legislative role of

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

the reason considered in its practical aspect as will.²⁹ Hence, it is not that the will is not subject to a law, but that it promulgates its own law.

Kant's moral theory represents a complete and ordered whole in another respect also. Kant is not only concerned with universality of the moral principle which regulates specific moral maxims. He is also concerned with morality as ordered teleologically and socially, i.e., with morality as action which is both social and which is action towards an end. This end, of course, is a *bonum*. This is not to say that the concept of the *summum bonum* determines the will, which must at all events remain pure, but that the will in its purity as moral law strives towards the completeness of the *summum bonum* as its proper end.

Hence, though the *summum bonum* may be the whole *object* of a pure practical reason, i.e., a pure will, yet it is not on that account to be regarded as its *determining principle*; and the moral law alone must be regarded as the principle on which that and its realization or promotion are aimed at.³⁰

The concept of the *summum bonum* contains an ambiguity for Kant. He explains that it can be conceived as the *bonum supremum* or as the *bonum consummatum*. Virtue or the perfect determination of the will by the moral law is the *bonum supremum*.³¹ As such it is the supreme condition of that happiness which is referred to as the *bonum consummatum*.³² The two together as the goal of human existence constitute the realization of that moral-practical *telos* which gives to life its wholeness.

Now inasmuch as virtue and happiness together constitute the possession of the *summum bonum* in a person, and the distribution of happiness in exact proportion to morality (which is the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy) constitutes the *summum bonum* of a possible world; hence this *summum bonum* expresses the whole, the perfect good, in which, however, virtue as the condition is always the supreme good since it has no condition above it . . .³³

The idea of a full realization of the *summum bonum*, however, leads Kant to postulate the existence of God "as the necessary condition of the possibility of the *summum bonum*."³⁴ For nature and the moral law to be in harmony, which is a necessary con-

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

dition of the realization of the *bonum consummatum*, we must posit an author of nature who is both intelligence and will and who as "the highest original good" is the ground of the "highest derived good (the best world)."³⁶

This last parenthetical phrase gives us the first hint of the complete account of Kant's *summum bonum*, which he calls the concept of the Kingdom of God.³⁶ This is God's Kingdom in two senses: (1) it is God Who, as Author, makes the *summum bonum* achieved in this Kingdom possible by virtue of His bringing nature and morality into a harmony which is "foreign to each of itself."³⁷ And (2) because in this Kingdom we come to see that the moral laws (duties) are commands of God; that is, they are not to be seen as the arbitrary sanctions of an alien deity but as commands of a morally perfect will with whom man's will must be in harmony if man is to attain the *summum bonum*.³⁸

And the final form of the *summum bonum* is seen to be that of a *Kingdom* of God because: (1) Laws of universal validity are the only means by which to make possible an order or system in which different rational beings can be united.³⁹ And (2) because, as Kant's theorems show, it is only by divesting the will of its purely private ends that we can pronounce the will to be a "moral" will. Hence the *finis* of the moral-practical *telos* for the Kantian ethic is both social and under the reign of God.

To be concluded

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³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-226.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (London: Longmans, 1959), p. 51.