



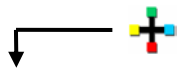
## The Threat and the Promise

(90tp)

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The Gospel and Our Culture (U.K.), 7 (Autumn 1990): 2-3.

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One or two encounters in the past few weeks have made me realize, in a way I had not done before, that the thrust of the programme on 'The Gospel and Our Culture' is one that makes some good Christian friends very angry. In a recent discussion I was asked to accept, as a basic axiom, that all dogma must be open to question and criticism. I agreed, on the condition this dogma was itself also open to question. The anger which this produced was very understandable. There is a deep fear that the basis on which our 'free democratic society' rests is being undermined. In an earlier newsletter I referred to the book of Alain Finkielkraut on 'The Undoing of Thought'. The current issue of the journal of the Higher Education Foundation carries a review of this book which endorses Finkielkraut's attack on the destruction of values in the name of 'culture', and insists that there must be a hierarchy of values in the light of which all societies must be criticized, but gives no hint of the foundation on which these values should or could rest. 'Christian educational institutions, therefore, should not be enclosures for the inculcation of dogma, but communities in which their distinctive assumptions are critically examined and imaginatively 'applied' (op cit Vol 2 No 1, page 69). No indication is given of the basis upon which such criticism should rest, and yet you cannot criticize any claim to truth except on the basis of what you accept as true, and in respect of which you suspend criticism. I am reminded of the remark of an experienced teacher in a large comprehensive school: 'I know perfectly well that, in my school, dogma reigns in every classroom except R.E. [Religious Education] where, of course, it is treated as rubbish'.

The fear, that in criticizing the Enlightenment we should put in jeopardy the immense benefits that we have gained from its insights, is very understandable and legitimate. Here I have been encouraged by a rereading of (part of) a book which made a deep impression on me when I read it 50 years ago.

Charles Norris Cochran's book 'Christianity and Classical Culture'. It is a study by a classical scholar of the movement of thought from Augustus to Augustine, from the time when classical culture was at its most brilliant to the time when it was disintegrating and was being

replaced by a new way of thinking based on the model of the Trinity. Cochran shows, I, think, three things: (1) that classical thought, for all its brilliance, disintegrated because it was unable to overcome certain basic dichotomies – that between will and reason, that between the ‘sensible’ and the ‘intelligible’, and that between ‘virtue and ‘fortune’ in the understanding of human history; (2) that the trinitarian model, accepted on the basis of revelation, provided a new starting point for thought, a new *arche*, from which nature and history could be understood in a coherent and rational way; and (3) that this new model, so far from involving the jettisoning of the values of classical culture, made it possible for them to be carried forward into a new phase of human culture.

The essential matter is the starting point. All systematic thinking about fundamental matters has to begin with certain things that are taken for granted. There is no way in which these assumptions can be ‘proved’ on the basis of some other starting point, because that starting point would itself have to be ‘proved’, and we should be sliding into an infinite regress. Enlightenment thought tried to find a secure starting point in the thinking mind: *cogito, ergo sum*. This already implies a vast assumption which can certainly be questioned – namely that the cosmos is so ordered that certitude about it is available to human minds apart from any dependence upon its creator. Such a starting point leads necessarily to a world in which things can only be explained in terms of causes and not in terms of purpose, because knowledge of the purpose of ongoing activity is only available if the person, whose activity it is, chooses to reveal it. If there is no such revelation, then questions about the purpose of human life can only be matters of speculation – the kind of speculation from which Bacon advised us to turn to the study of ‘facts’. But if God has in fact revealed his purpose, then that revelation must be the starting point for all systematic thinking about the nature of human existence. That there is such a revelation is the dogma on which the whole flowering of culture in the thousand years following Augustine rested. The treasures of classical culture were not lost; but they could only be carried forward into a new age (an age which might otherwise have been one of total barbarism) because there was an entity which both embodies and transcends culture, namely the Catholic Church. The old could only be rescued by beginning from a fresh

starting point.

I find that in talking with many Christians there is real anger when one insists that revelation has to be the starting point. On the contrary it is urged, any alleged revelation must be assessed by the criteria we already have. Only so can we safeguard human rational autonomy from the tyranny of dogma. But if human reason is itself a gift of God, is it not rather absurd for us to engage in this kind of posturing, in the presence of the Author of our rationality? Is it really ‘dehumanizing’ to be content not only to live, but also to think, by grace? The reviewer of Finkelkraut to whom I have referred, ends with a cry of pain: What, it may be asked in despair, of Christians who use the word liberal’ as a term of abuse?’ Fair enough, but what shall we say of those Christians who use the term ‘fundamentalist’ as a term of abuse? Do we not need both a clear and open statement of the foundation on which we build, *and* the openness to all truth which is the necessary corollary of the belief that Jesus is himself the truth? Is it not time to abandon this slanging match and to listen to each other? Might we even ask (not in despair) for dialogue?

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