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IS DOGMATIC THEOLOGY DEAD?

Scarcely noticed at the time of the death of God was the death of dogmatic theology. The great forerunner of the present theological era, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, apparently administered the death blow himself. According to Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth's monumental and influential dogmatic theology moved in the right direction, toward a nonreligious interpretation of Christianity; but in the end, Barth's work degenerated into a "positivism of revelation." The most vociferous disciples of Bonhoeffer have, in turn, taken it for granted that nothing is further from the maturity characteristic of modem man come of age than something as religious as dogmatic theology. The very word "dogmatics" has a dissonant ring today.

As some, however, have wondered whether God is really dead, now with the publication in English of Regin Prenter's readable dogmatics, *Creation and Redemption,*[1] we have occasion to wonder also whether dogmatic theology is really dead. Prenter, who teaches Lutheran dogmatics at the University of Arhus in Denmark, is a careful student of Bonhoeffer, as his essay, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth's Positivism of Revelation" shows.[2] In that essay Prenter reminds us that the "religionless interpretation of the Gospel which Bonhoeffer seeks is meant primarily to express the relation of *God's* revelation to the *world come of age."*[3]

God and God's revelation are central concerns for Bonhoeffer. Prenter also observes that, in keeping with that interest in Divine revelation, Bonhoeffer maintains "a deep respect for the classical dogmas, even where they are not immediately interpretable to us today."[4] Concomitantly, Bonhoeffer calls for a "secret discipline" of faith, through cult and prayer, as well as for the public, nonreligious interpretation of the faith. Prenter sees the need for dogmatics arising here: to nourish and to guide the secret discipline of faith by reformulating the classical dogmas which gave substance to faith in the past. Dogmatic theology, then, is an intramural enterprise. It is not meant directly for ears outside the walls of the worshipping community.

Accordingly Prenter maintains that *dogma* —or insight into the history of revelation—is mediated to us through the biblical writings and is formulated in the creeds *as they are confessed in worship.* The confession of faith which formulates dogma in the worship service was itself "originally a song of praise addressed primarily to God and only secondarily to men."[5]

1. Regin Prenter, *Creation and Redemption,* tr. Theodor I. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 596 pp.
2. *World Come of Age,* ed. R. G. Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 93-130.
3. *Ibid.,* p. 98.
4. *Ibid.,* p. 105.
5. *Creation and Redemption,* p. 132.

Apart from the administration of the sacraments, preaching, prayer, and praise, therefore, the confession of the congregation has no meaning. This is also true of dogmatics, since dogmatics interprets the confession of the worshipping congregation. Moreover, the setting in worship gives dogmatics a marked freedom, because the confession of the Church is a "flexible and unfathomable expression of praise which always maintains an open perspective toward the manifoldness of the Scriptures and toward the mystery of God's saving activity."[6] Prenter comments that orthodox confessionalism, in contrast, perverts dogmatic expressions in a juridical direction, turning them into fixed and exhaustive definitions.

It should come as no surprise to find Prenter beginning his dogmatic exposition with the doctrine of the Trinity, as Karl Barth does. This doctrine, clearly, does not "drop from heaven" (Paul Tillich, referring to Barth's procedure). The doctrine of the Trinity is given in the Church's worship. Apart from that context, according to Prenter, it is a "logical absurdity."[7] In that context, however, it gives concise witness to the God who actually is worshipped, "the Father who comes to us only as he himself addresses us through the Son and unites us with himself through the Son and the Holy Spirit."[8 9]

A corollary of Prenter's trinitarian point of departure, like that of Barth's, is his denial of a "natural knowledge of God" and his rejection of the validity of any independent "natural theology." But here Prenter's significant divergence from his Swiss teacher begins to become apparent. For Prenter, man cannot enter into a "living relation" with God the Father outside of the congregation where the Holy Spirit reveals the hidden essence of God by uniting his people with him through Jesus Christ the Son?

The phrase, "living relation," is deliberate. It is meant to allow for what Prenter call a "natural God-consciousness," that is, "a certain consciousness of God's existence" or "a sense of duty and guilt in relation to God's will."[10] This affirmation indicates that Prenter takes seriously the created reality of man as well as the redeemed reality. There *is* a point of contact: man's relationship to his Creator. The Christian dogma, then, is not handed to the nonbeliever or the believer as a self-contained whole. That would be revelational positivism. Rather the Christian dogma is addressed to a God-consciousness which already exists. In the same vein, Prenter takes issue with Barth's intermeshing of Law and Gospel. Prenter holds that man lives under the Creator's Law prior to his encounter with the Gospel.

Prenter's method is in keeping with his confessional point of departure. Dogmatics, for him, is a critical science. That means that it appraises and prepares the way for the content of preaching by comparing preaching to the normative biblical writings. Through mutual interaction with exegesis and preaching, and guided by the creed, dogmatics brings together *loci,* "themes which in the encounter between the witness of the Scriptures and the preaching Church have proved their decisive importance for the appropriation of the content of the message."[11] Here again Prenter's thought diverges from Barth's. For the latter, dogmatics is "faith seeking understanding" or, as it were, faith rethinking the thoughts of God. Barth accordingly attempts to *understand* the unity of creation and redemption through his vision of the supralapsarian eternity of God and God's election of man in Jesus Christ. Creation then becomes the stage which is necessarily posited for the realization of election. For Prenter, dogmatics is not faith seeking understanding, but faith confessing.

Thus Prenter does affirm strongly the unity of creation and redemption, that the Creator and the Redeemer are one. But that must be believed; it cannot be understood. Creation and redemption are data of faith; we cannot penetrate into the Divine *ratio* of their unity. In keeping with this standpoint, Prenter argues that there is no rational explanation of sin; it is neither explicitly nor implicitly an understandable or a necessary stage in the unfolding of the Divine economy.

Prenter's Zoci-theology is systematic, then, in the sense that it attempts to be consistent, not in the sense that it is a self-contained whole. The structure of the dogmatic argument is held together by the force of the confession which is set in worship. It is not held together by logical entailment. This, along with Prenter's setting of dogmatics in the free atmosphere of worship, implies that the dogmatic formulations and the dogmatic arguments have an evidently historical character, that they are manifestly contingent. Which, in turn, means that Prenter

6. *Ibid.,* p. 115.
7. *Ibid.,* p. 50.
8. *Ibid.,* p. 39.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.,* p. 40.
11 .*Ibid.,* p. 186.

has again steered around a positivism of revelation. The eternal thoughts of God in heaven and the temporal thoughts of man in the Church are clearly distinguished. Hence, the man who wants to enter into the meaning of dogma is not presented with a corpus of Divine truths which he must then accept or reject *en masse.* He is shown, rather, the living creaturely faith of his fellow man confessing before the unfathomableness of his Creator.

The way seems open, then, for the unfolding of a dogmatics which is not positivistic. Yet one significant obstacle remains. Prenter himself underlines this in the aforementioned essay when he explains Bonhoeffer's conception of a positivism of revelation: "It is that proclamation of God's revelation which presents its truths for mere acceptance *without being able to show clearly how they are related to the life of the world come of age."*[12] Prenter avoids revelational positivism, as we have seen, insofar as he clearly indicates that dogmatic affirmations are directly relevant only for the community of faith and for its secret discipline.

Dogmatics is not directly relevant for men outside of the worshipping community. For Prenter, moreover, as we also saw, when dogma is heard, or overheard, by men outside of the Church, it is received in the context of an already existing, conscious relation to God. Dogma is not received as something wholly other, which negates the person's conscious existence prior to his encounter with dogma.

Yet what about the men *inside* of the Church? Men inside the community of faith, needless to say, are also men of their time, influenced by its social configurations and its culture. Dogmas must be presented to them in a form which they can understand; otherwise revelational positivism would exist within the Church itself. Prenter recognizes this when he construes dogmatics as a critical science "which seeks to give the true interpretation of dogma in the light of growing insight into the biblical witness *and* a constantly better understanding of the actual situation to which the proclamation addresses itself."[13] But here Prenter stops.

One looks in vain for an analysis of the contemporary situation in his dogmatics. One looks in vain for a careful consideration of the speech and the metaphysical presuppositions of the modern world. Prenter *may* be writing self-consciously with a view to the situation of modern man, but he gives no substantial clue concerning what his analysis is or the way in which he arrived at it. One would have expected to find at least one section treating the modern world and perhaps, what would facilitate preaching even more, a continuing counterpoint of socio-cultural analysis as the dogmatic discussion developed. Friedrich Gogarten, whom Prenter admires and whose theology resembles Prenter's, has taken the risk of such a socio-cultural analysis and had done so with suggestive results.[14] Gogarten projects his analysis as an examination of the contemporary form of the Creator's Law, under which all men live. An interpretation of the contemporary situation also plays a similarly key role, as is well known, in the thought of Paul Tillich, to which Prenter refers favorably. In contrast, Prenter himself does not attempt to exhibit how his affirmations relate to modern man. That is a regrettable shortcoming: it means that a positivism of revelation is not fully avoided.

Prenter's *Creation and Redemption* shows, then, that dogmatic theology is still alive, that it is not just a resucitated corpse from a bygone era. And a review of the rich content of Prenter's dogmatic exposition would further strengthen this point, notwithstanding minor questions which the reader of such an extensive work can almost inevitably raise. The simplicity of Prenter's outline itself reflects the freshness of his discussion: The Task of Dogmatics, Prolegomena, The God of Creation, The Man of Creation, The God of Redemption, The Man of Redemption. And, Prenter's overriding theme sounds both biblical and relevant to the modern world: that the God of life, who gives man life, graciously overcomes powers of destruction which threaten and then engulf man.

In particular, Prenter's biblically based but not systematically christological *(a la Barth)* anthropology, with its illuminating discussion of "Person and Nature," and his balanced Christology are worthy of special attention. When all has been said, however, all is not well. One wonders what it all really means for that worshipping man who is at the same time a man who has come of age. Dogmatic theology thus shows itself to be alive, but not without a certain socio-cultural malnutrition.

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12. JF*orld Come of Age,* p. 105, italics added.
13. *Creation and Redemption,* p. 8, italics added.
14. *Vide* Larry Shiner, *The Secularization of History: An Introduction to the Theology of Friedrich Gogarten* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966).