

SURVEY

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DIALECTICAL THEOLOGY AND NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

“Dialectical theology”—also called “crisis theology”—is the name given to a movement which originated within German Protestant theology after the First World War. Its foremost representatives were Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, Eduard Thurneysen, Georg Merz, Emil Brunner and Rudolf Bultmann. This movement arose as a reaction to the liberal Protestant theology developed especially under the influence of Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschel, Wilhelm Herrmann and Adolf von Harnack, to mention only the more prominent among its representatives. Under this movement of liberal theology could also be classed a certain relativistic conception of Christianity among the religions proposed by the followers of the school of history of religions. Perhaps the most important philosopher of this school was Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) who, in his celebrated book, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte* (Tuebingen-Leipzig, 1902¹), challenged the prevalent theological view of Christianity as absolute religion. Being a historical phenomenon, Christianity is conditioned, in his view, by the historical situations and environments in which it found itself, and consequently it cannot be considered as absolute. Christianity is indeed “the loftiest and most spiritual revelation we know at all” and it can be said to be the culminating point of all religions *hitherto*, but it cannot be proved with certainty that it should remain as the last culminating point.² Liberal theology in general had a tendency to compromise the trans-

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1. Several editions. Eng. tr. *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (London: 1971).
 2. E. Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums* (Tuebingen and Leipzig: 1902), pp. 77-81. See also *Idem*, “The Place of Christianity among the World Religions”, in *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. by J. Hick and B.H. Bebbelwaite, Fount Paperbacks (Glasgow: 1980), pp. 15-22.

cendence and sovereignty of God as well as the uniqueness of Christian revelation.

Reacting to this, dialectical theology emphasized, in the first place, the transcendence and sovereignty of God as the "wholly other" in comparison with man, an infinite gulf separating them from each other. In the second place, it vindicated the uniqueness of Christian revelation in comparison with other religions, but at the cost of degrading or even completely denying revelation in these religions.

As Karl Barth is rightly called the father of dialectical theology, so too his celebrated book, *Roemerbrief* ("Epistle to the Romans"), first published in 1919 and later in a revised form in 1922, can be called its *Magna Carta*. Since then have followed a series of publications wherein Barth has developed his theology. Together with Gogarten, Thurneysen and Merz, he started a periodical called *Zwischen den Zeiten* ("Between the Times"), which became the mouthpiece of the new theology. However, diversity and even opposition of views within the group led to the discontinuation of the periodical in 1933.

What interests us here in dialectical theology is only its attitude towards religious pluralism; in other words, its attitude towards the non-Christian religions. We shall consider especially the views of some of these theologians on the nature of non-Christian religions as well as the relation between these religions and Christianity. We shall limit ourselves here to three of these theologians: Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and Johannes Witte. Space does not permit us to consider the views of the Dutch theologian Hendrik Kraemer, although he was greatly influenced by the dialectical theology.

Although Karl Barth's views on religions can be traced in several of his works, two of them may be considered more important than the others: his *Roemerbrief*³ and his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* Vol. I/2.⁴ According to Barth—and in fact according to all dialectical theo-

3. First published, Bern 1919; revised ed. (Muenchen: 1922). Eng. tr. *The Epistle to the Romans*, tr. by E.C. Hoskyns from the 6th ed. (London: 1933).

4. Vol. I, Part 2 was first published in 1938. Eng. tr. by G.T. Thomson and H. Knight (Edinburgh: 1956).

The more important works of Barth and Brunner have been translated into English, but unfortunately they were not available to me. Hence the original German texts are used, unless otherwise indicated. The English translations of the cited German passages are mine.

gians—the explanation which St. Paul gives in his Epistle to the Romans (I, 18ff.) should provide the guidelines for a Christian judgement or evaluation of the non-Christian religions. St. Paul says there that, although God has revealed himself to man, man in his sinfulness has distorted that revelation.

Central to Barth's theology in general and to his judgement on religions in particular is the concept of Christian revelation. He admits that world-history and human history abound in other "revelations" and that there are accordingly, enough witnesses to such other "revelations". Every great poet or artist is such a witness. But the term "revelation" is improperly applied to them. On the other hand, the revelation recorded in the Bible is something fundamentally different so that witnesses of "revelation" such as Plato, Socrates and Goethe cannot be put on the same level with the biblical witnesses, the writers of the Old and the New Testaments.⁵ For Barth, "Jesus Christ, and He alone, is to be called revelation in the original, true and strict meaning of the concept."⁶ As regards the Holy Scripture, it is not revelation as such; it is revelation only insofar as Jesus Christ speaks to us through the witness of his prophets and apostles. Speaking of the essence of revelation, our author writes :

To know anything about revelation in the original, true and strict sense of the concept, we must know about Jesus Christ 'Revelations' which are different from that which has taken place and that which is still taking place in Him, we can only call 'revelations' in a perverted, invalid and loose sense of the concept. The discussion as to whether it is not revelation also in 'other religions' is superfluous. We need not hesitate to grant to this then, for revelation to them clearly means something very different.⁷

If the liberal and relativistic theologians see in Christianity a continuation and the final culmination in the evolution of the religious consciousness of man, Barth emphasizes the "discontinuity" between religions and Christian revelation.

5. K. Barth, *Das christliche Verstaendnis der Offenbarung* (Muenchen: 1948), pp. 15-16.

6. K. Barth, in: *Revelation*, ed. by J. Baillie and H. Martin (London: 1937), pp. 49 and 55.

7. *Ibid.* p. 45.

Barth's conception of religion is clear from the following: "We begin by stating that religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed we must say that it is the one great concern of godless men".⁸ These words of Barth can be said to epitomize his conception of religion. Religion must be judged and evaluated in the light of the biblical revelation. Judged in the light of Christian revelation, religion is unbelief rather than belief; for while "revelation is God's self-offering and self-manifestation", religion is "a human attempt to anticipate with God in his revelation wills to do and in fact does. It is an attempt to replace the divine work by a human manufacture, that is to say, the divine reality which has been offered and manifested to us in revelation is replaced by a concept of God which has been arbitrarily and wilfully evolved by man."⁹ Religion is the product resulting from man's attempt to reach God by his own powers. By it he tries to justify and save himself. However, what man achieves by his own efforts as knowledge of God is not really knowledge of God but a pure fiction which has no relation whatever to God, nor can man justify or save himself.

It is to be noted that Barth's judgement on religion applies to all religions. Even the Christian religion, insofar as it represents the work of man, is unbelief and false and it needs to be elevated by the grace of God. The Church is indeed the locus of true religion, but it is so only because and insofar as it lives by the grace of Christ. In the light of such a general conception of the nature of religion, one can easily understand why the dialectical theologians in general prefer to speak of "Christian Message", "Word of God" and the like instead of "Christian religion", contrasting it with the non-christian religions which are often termed "religions of man", "religions of natural man" and the like.

The radical incapacity of man to come to a knowledge of God, however partial it be, leads Barth to repudiate all natural theology. While the advocates of *theologia naturalis* admitted the possibility of every man to have a certain knowledge of God on the basis of the analogy of being [*analogia entis*] possessed by God and the creatures, our Swiss theologian emphatically maintained that God could be known only through God, that all knowledge of God could come only from God's self-disclosure.

8. K. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* ½ (Zollikon: 1939), p. 327.

9. *Ibid.* pp. 328-329.

Closely allied to Barth's rejection of natural theology is his opposition to the missiological conception according to which the word of God is not addressed to men who are completely devoid of knowledge of God but to men to whom God has already spoken in some way and who already possess some knowledge of God, however imperfect it may be. In other words, Barth denies that the proclaimed word of God has a "point of contact" [*Anknepfungspunkt*] with that the listener already knows. He writes: "Revelation does not link up with a human religion which is already present and practised. It contradicts it, just as religion previously contradicted revelation.¹⁰ It abolishes it, just as religion previously abolished revelation." In fact, Barth subtitled section 17 of his *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* ½ "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion."

We have outlined here only the important feature as it were, of the Barthian theology of religions. It is important to remember as Hans Urs von Balthasar in his study of Barth¹¹ has rightly pointed out, that Barth underwent a theological development during the period between his *Roemerbrief* and his monumental work, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*. As a matter of fact, in his more mature years Barth softened or modified some of the views expressed in his *Roemerbrief*.

II

EMIL BRUNNER (1889-1966)

Like his compatriot Barth, Brunner was averse to the neo-Protestant liberal theology of his time and was firmly determined to vindicate the transcendence of the Christian revelation against the relativistic interpretations of liberals. Among his works that deal especially with the phenomenon of religions are: *Religionsphilosophie protestantischer Theologie* (Muenchen-Berlin, 1927); Eng. tr. *The Philosophy of Religion from the standpoint of Protestant Theology* (London, 1937); *Die Christusbotschaft im Kampf mit den Religionen* (The message of Christ in Conflict with the religions) (Stuttgart-Basel, 1931), Eng. tr. unknown; *Natur and Gnade* (Nature and Grace) (Tuebingen, 1934, enlarged second edition 1935), Eng. tr. unknown; *Offenbarung und Vernunft* (Zuerich, 1941), Eng. tr. *Revelation and Reason*, (London, 1947).

10. *Ibid.* p. 331.

11. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth, Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Olten: 1951).

While Barth's theology of non-Christian religious is almost exclusively based on the biblical data, Brunner's above-mentioned works show that he was well acquainted with the important doctrines of non-biblical religions, especially Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Islam.

As regards revelation, Brunner maintains that Scripture (Ps. 19; Rom. 1:18ff; 2:14f; Jo. 1:4-9; Acts 14:17; 17:26-27) testifies to the fact of a "general" revelation, which our author also calls "creation-revelation" (*Schoepfungsoffenbarung*) and "nature-revelation" [*Natur-offenbarung*]. This revelation of God is found in the works of creation and in the law written in the conscience of every man. Nowhere has the Bible indicated that through sin, the capacity of man to know God in his works has been destroyed, even if it has been disturbed. However, through his sin man turns away from God and makes use of the general revelation in creation to worship the creature instead of the Creator. The fallen man does not stand outside of the divine revelation nor is he devoid of a certain relationship with God. Nevertheless on account of his sinful blindness all that the "natural man can do with the general revelation is to make images of false god and to create for himself a religion of justification by work and of salvation by self. According to St. Paul, the revelation of God in creation is sufficient for every man to come to a knowledge of God's majesty and wisdom; but the sin of man has so clouded his vision that he sees or fancies gods in the creaturers instead of God. It is only the Christian, who has recognized the revelation of Christ, who can, according to Brunner, have a correct natural knowledge of God;¹² for "the living and personal God can be known only by a personal meeting, through His personal word, through that special event to which the Bible, and the Bible alone, bears witness, and the content of which is Jesus Christ."¹³

The view advocated by Brunner that God has revealed himself in his creatures was a thesis that was unacceptable to Barth, as in his view outside of the revelation in Jesus Christ, there is no revelation of God. In his book, *Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner* (No! Reply to Emil Brunner) (Muenchen, 1934) it is this view of Brunner that man has the capacity of knowing God's revelation on account of his being created

12. E. Brunner, *Natur und Gnade* (Tuebingen: 1935), pp. 12-15.

13. *Idem*, *The Philosophy of Religion from the standpoint of Protestant Theology* (London: 1958), pp. 15-16.

in God's image, with the consequent possibility of a natural theology that Barth attacks vehemently.

In sharp contrast to this general revelation is the revelation in the Old and New Testaments. Though the revelation in the Old Testament is somewhat different from that in the New, the biblical revelation can be grasped through both the Testaments. One of the important characteristics of the biblical revelation is that it is inseparable from historical facts and that it is understandable only in and through them. Speaking of the fundamental difference between the biblical revelation and revelation in other religions, Brunner writes:

Just as the God who reveals himself in the Holy Scripture is wholly different from the gods and the deities of the non-biblical religions, so too is the biblical understanding of revelation something wholly different. This, however, does not exclude that certain characteristics by means of which, within the different religions, the process of revelation is distinguished from other processes and is characterized as such are present also in the biblical revelation how else could the same word 'revelation' be used? But in the biblical understanding of revelation these characteristics are changed not only in degree but fundamentally, and it is precisely this fundamental otherness that is decisively biblical.¹⁴

In all religions revelation is understood to be a process by means of which something previously known to man and which is unknowable to man through the normal channels of knowledge becomes known to him in a mysterious manner. This is true also with regard to the biblical revelation. However, it possesses two additional characteristics: absoluteness and personal character. Furthermore, revelation is everywhere understood to be the communication of an extraordinary knowledge. In the biblical revelation, however, the knowledge communicated is radically different from the knowledge communicated in other revelations. For in the case of other revelations there is communication of a knowledge that is important for life; but the knowledge communicated in the biblical revelation has to do not with some *thing*, but with some *person*: with me and with God. It is a personal address of God to man.

14. *Idem, Offenbarung und Vernunft* (Zuerich: 1941), p. 23.

Although Brunner admits the presence of a certain revelation in all religions, he denies to it any salvific value. After the fall, man is not able to have a true knowledge of God: "God can only be known through God." It is only the special, biblical revelation that can show the sinful man the way to God.¹⁵

In addition to his statements about revelation in religions in general, Brunner has expressed his views on the question of revelation in some of the important living religions. Although our author admits, as we said earlier, that there is some revelation in all religions, he points out that the term "revelation" is not understood in the same manner in all religions. The claim of primitive religions to revelation stands at the lowest level. A greater degree of revelation can be ascribed to the higher polytheistic religions. In religions of higher mysticism, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, one can speak of a still higher degree of revelation. But even here one cannot speak of revelation in the Christian understanding of that term. For mysticism may lead to the experience of revelation, but not to the revelation itself. In the same manner, as regards Buddhism, it is to be noted that the Buddha never claimed to have received any divine revelation. Moreover, even though his "Enlightenment" may be regarded as a supernatural intuition, it is not a revelation, since in it no revealing God is believed in or experienced. In its origin as well as in its end, Buddhism is a purely anthropocentric religion. Amida Buddhism does show some parallelisms with the doctrines of Luther. But on closer examination, the parallelisms turn out to be more apparent than real. For Amida Buddha, far from being a God or a historical revealer, is only a mythical figure.

According to Brunner, it is not only Judaism and Islam that stand in close relationship with the biblical revelation, but also the religion of Zarathustra, who was a contemporary as well as (geographically) a neighbour of the prophets of Israel. Brunner sees many historical connexions between Zarathustra's doctrines and the teachings of the New Testament. In fact, he considers the concept of revelation in Zoroastrianism to be the closest to that of the Bible, for "it is unfulfilled Old Testament, prophetism and messianism." Nevertheless, even the parallelisms between the prophetism of Zarathustra and the Old Testament revelation are only apparent; for they differ fundamentally in their

15. *Ibid.* p. 76.

content. The religion of Zarathustra is a moralism without the mystery of love.

As regards Judaism (to be distinguished from the Old Testament religion) and Islam, these too cannot be considered as parallels of the Old Testament revelation, which is a forerunner of the Christian revelation. For, although Islam and certain forms of Judaism recognize Christ as a messenger of their God Allah or Jahwe, they do not recognize him as the Christ, the final revelation.

In contrast to all these religions, the Christian faith stands alone in its claim to be revelation in the strict and unconditional sense because it alone dares to assert; "The Word was made flesh," No other religion has the courage to assert: "The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jo. 1 : 14). It is this that makes the Christian faith entirely different from the other religions.¹⁶

In his book, *Die Christusbotschaft in Kampf mit den Religionen*, Brunner classifies the concept of revelation under three heads: manifestation, doctrine and real presence. In the primitive religions revelation is identical with manifestation, a somewhat sensible and real presence of gods, personal or impersonal. In the higher religions (such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam etc.) revelation is conceived of in the form of a doctrine, law, myth, theological explanations or predictions. The third kind of revelation, the revelation in Jesus Christ, is neither manifestation nor doctrine but rather one in which both are united in a mysterious manner. Though revelation in Jesus Christ has real presence in common with the primitive form of revelation, this presence is not sensible but highly indirect and unrecognizable. God was in Christ personally, but hidden; being God, he cannot appear visibly to the senses. Only through the Holy Ghost can faith recognize him. In common with the second type of revelation, revelation in Christ is indeed a doctrine, but it is something more than a doctrine: for doctrine and person coalesce in the incarnate Christ.

Historicity is, in Brunner's view, a decisive factor in the Christian revelation. But the first and the second types of revelation are a-historical revelations. No one can say at what time the revelation of the

16. *Ibid.* pp. 215-233.

Veda took place. The Buddha, as a historical figure, is only a teacher; the moment one considers him as God, he becomes non-historical and one among the many gods. Revelation in Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is a historical fact in the strict sense, which can be concretely located in world-history.

In fine, while admitting that all religions are based upon belief in some kind of revelation, Brunner defends the Christian revelation in Jesus Christ as something very different from the revelation assumed in other religions. He maintains, moreover, that any parallelisms between the two are but apparent and superficial. Consequently, it is wrong to consider the Christian revelation as one species belonging to the genus of religions, as though it were just like the other species of religions. "Were Christianity only a species among the religions, however relatively higher it may stand among the species," observes Brunner, "that will be the end of missions. For the most that could be expected in such a case will be mutually fruitful exchange of religious values."¹⁷

According to Brunner, the religions of natural man are the product of divine primeval revelation (Uroffenbarung) or universal revelation given to all men in creation, on the one hand, and of human sin, on the other. These two factors are so closely interwoven with each other that they cannot be separated from each other. Because of the primeval revelation of God there is in every religion a certain degree of truth which has its origin in God. But because of the sinfulness of man this revelation of God has been transformed into human folly. All religions have some knowledge of God. But this knowledge is always mingled with God and the world, or with God and the ego, or with both together, without God being distinguished from the creature. The mingling of the knowledge of God with ego is specially manifest in the fact that, even in the worship of God, man seeks his own self.¹⁸

As mentioned earlier, Brunner accepts, in contrast to Barth, "point of contact" between the Word of God and the natural man. The first and the foremost reason for this is the fact of solidarity of Christians with the pagans; for Christians too are pagans. A Christian too, being *simul justus et peccator*, must look upon the pagan as his

17. E. Brunner, *Die Christusbotschaft im Kampf mit den Religionen* (Stuttgart and Basel: 1931), pp. 2-3.

18. *Idem*, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, pp. 252-263.

brother. Brunner admits that this sentiment has been missing in the history of the missions, which have been characterized solely by the feeling of superiority of the Gospel. Secondly, as we stated earlier, Brunner maintained that God did not leave the pagans without some revelation of Himself. Even in his paganism, a pagan remains a creature of God and bears traces of it within himself. God has never completely abandoned the pagans; rather in and through their pagan lies and perversions God is somehow near to them. Moreover, even the pagan yearns after the salvation of the children of God. The pagan not only flees from God, but in his very flight from God, he yearns after and seeks God.

This yearning after God serves as a "point of contact" between paganism and Christian faith. Such a point of contact was made use of by St. Paul in his Areopagus speech (Acts 17: 19ff). Following the example of St. Paul, preachers of the Gospel should discover the points of contact with what the pagan hearer of the Word of God already knows about God, sin, creation, love, yearning after happiness and the like. Just as the apostles Paul and John borrowed several words from the religious vocabulary of the hellenistic world and gave them a new content, so too must the preacher of the Gospel message build upon what his hearers already know. Brunner is so convinced of the presence of such positive points of contact in every pagan religion that, in his view, only pure doctrinalism is able to deny it.¹⁹

While dealing with Barth's views, we mentioned that he rejected the analogy of being and, consequently, natural theology. Brunner, on the other hand, admits an analogy of being based on the nature of God as Creator of the universe. He thus admits also a natural theology, a knowledge of God based on the revelation of God in creation. However, on account of the implications of the term *theologia naturalis* for the tradition and for Catholic theology, our author prefers to speak—at least in his later writings—of "Christian doctrine of general or natural revelation."²⁰ Though he admits a natural theology, he was strongly opposed to the Thomistic doctrine prevalent in the Catholic theology

19. *Idem*, *Die Christusbotschaft*. . . pp. 15-20. Cf. also *Idem*, "Die Frage nach dem 'Anknüpfungspunkt' als Problem der Theologie", in: *Zwischen den Zeiten*, 10 (1932), pp. 505-532.

20. *Idem*, *Natur und Gnade*, p. v.

that grace does not destroy nature but only perfects it (*gratia non tolli naturam sed perficit eam*).²¹

Such, in brief, are the main views of Brunner on the nature of religions. His contribution on this topic is really too vast to be satisfactorily dealt with as a part of an article. Though belonging to the dialectical school, his theology is less exclusivistic with regard to religions than that of Barth. But, like Barth, he was opposed to the relativistic theories of the Christian faith, not only as found in the psychologism of Schleiermacher or in the historicism of Ernst Troeltsch, but also in the comparative studies of K. Hutton and R. Otto with regard to the Indian Bhakti religions,²² or the mentality of the Jerusalem Missionary Conference which found expression in *Rethinking Missions* (edited by W. E. Hocking, New York and London, 1932). Though he admitted a certain universal divine revelation which was open to every human being, he drew a sharp distinction between such a revelation and the revelation in Christian faith. Consequently, he reacted strongly against the suggestion from some quarters that the Scriptures of the religions could be considered as "Old Testament" for the followers of these religions; for, while the Old Testament had an orientation to Jesus Christ, the Scriptures of these religions have, according to Brunner, no orientation to Christ.²³ It is noteworthy that some of his views, especially concerning the "points of contact", are of great value even to the missionaries-and "dialogists"—of our own days.

Johannes Witte (1877-1945)

III

JOHANNES WITTE (1877-1945)

Less known than Barth and Brunner is Johannes Witte, who retired as Professor of General History of Religions and Missiology at the University of Berlin in 1939. Among his works on the theology of

21. *Idem*, *The Mediator: A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith* (London: 1934), p. 32f.

22. K. Hutton, *Die Bhakt-Religion in Indien und der christliche Glaube im Neuem Testament* (Stuttgart: 1930), R. Otto, *Die Gnadenreligionen Indiens und das Christentum. Vergleich und Unterscheidung*, Gotha 1930; Eng. tr. *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity* (London: 1930). As a matter of fact, Otto does distinguish very clearly the Christian faith from the *Bhakti* religions of India.

23. E. Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, pp. 218-219.

religions are two which we shall consider here. These are : *Die Christus-Botschaft und die Religionen* (The Message of Christ and Religions) (Goettingen, 1936) and *Offenbarung nur in der Bibel* (Revelation only in the Bible) (Goettingen, 1937).²⁴ The first book which had advocated a very negativistic attitude towards religions was strongly criticized by theologians like H.W. Schomerus, G. Rosenkranz, K. Hartenstein, and M. Schlunk, all of whom were especially opposed to Witte's absolute denial of revelation in non-biblical religions. In the second book, which is a reaction to their criticisms, our author does not modify his standpoint as expressed in the first book. On the contrary, he endeavours there to confirm and justify that standpoint by additional explanations.

The most important theological problem dealt with by Witte in the above-mentioned books is that of the presence of revelation in the non-biblical religions. Like Barth and Brunner, Witte had witnessed the relativization of the Christian religion by the followers of liberal theology and historians of religions. As he himself confesses in one of his works,²⁵ he had accepted the view, current in the period before the First World War, that "general revelation" and "elements of truth" were to be found in all religions. But already, from 1723 onwards, he had begun to investigate deeply the true biblical standpoint with regard to non-biblical religions *as laid down in Luther's works*. Luther's standpoint on the non-Christian religions is well epitomized by Witte in the following statement: "There is no doctrine that is valuable for salvation except the Gospel, all else is night and darkness." It is this position—perhaps with more emphasis than Luter intended—that has been taken by our author. In his works dealing with revelation in the religions, he repeatedly remarks that his view is in consonance with the view of Luther—and also of St. Paul.

The main objection of the Berlin missiologist to liberal theology was that it tended to humanize the Message of Christ and to put it in the same group as the other religions, even if they allotted to it a relatively superior position. Witte was determined to vindicate the unique position of the Message of Christ as compared to other religions. He prefers the term "Message of Christ" (Christus-Botschaft) to "Chris-

24. To my knowledge neither of these works have been translated into English.

25. J. Witte, *Unsere Auseinandersetzung mit der Deutschen Glaubensbewegung* (Berlin: 1934), p. 15.

tian religion" because it expresses the idea that Christ is the agent as well as the content of the message, a position which no other religion can claim.

His study of what the Bible itself has to say about the religions leads him to the following conclusions. St. Paul (Rom. 3 : 9-12) judges *all* men to be sinners. All men are thus under God's anger and God lets them go their way. As Witte puts it : "They walk the ways away from God, without God, blind, as living dead. . . . Thus their religions in piety and morality are really foolishness, totally perverted and falsehood (Rom. 1 : 18)".²⁶ Moreover, according to the Bible there is no general revelation. Even *acts* 14 and 17 do not speak of any general revelation of God to the heathens nor of "elements of truth" in their religions which should be perfected and elevated or "fulfilled" by the special revelation in Christ. Witte concedes that general revelation in the sense of a *possibility* to know God in the creation was offered to the pagans. But due to the sins of men, this possibility could not be realized and so it remained a "lost possibility."²⁷ However, men have a presentiment of their being created by someone and of their being indebted to someone. Nevertheless, they do not know the living God who created them and to whom they are indebted. As regards their religions, "they are completely perverted attempts, phansied out of blindness, to say the truth about God and to attain to God. They are a defection from God, denial of God, revolt against God and disobedience to God. They are error and wrong way, offence and going astray."²⁸ "All the manifestations of their religions, even those of the highest, are not at all revelations, but follies of their silly human phantay."²⁹ Similar descriptions of non-biblical religions abound in our author's works.

Witte goes beyond such statements about the religions in general. As Professor of History of Religions and as a longtime director of the East-Asia Mission, he had acquired some knowledge of the religions, especially Confucianism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. He considers in succession each of these religions³⁰ and comes to the conclusion that each of them is nothing but perverted attempts of fallen man to

26. J. Witte, *Die Christus-Botschaft und die Religionen* (Goettingen: 1936), p. 38.

27. *Ibid.* p. 40.

28. *Ibid.* pp. 43-44.

29. *Ibid.* p. 279.

30. *Ibid.* pp. 78-230.

say who created them and to whom they feel indebted. But in none of them can we trace revelation.

Witte's judgement on Hinduism and Buddhism may be mentioned here. Since a presentiment of being created by someone and of being indebted to someone is found in all men (including the pagans), the Indians also have an awareness that man is responsible to some being. But what they say about this responsibility is absolutely wrong, since they do not know God as the one to whom they feel responsible or indebted. Witte rejects the Hindu doctrine of rebirth as an unfounded assertion without any truth or proof. Judged in the light of the New Testament and the teachings of Luther, the *Vadānta* does not contain any truth at all, as in the case of any other human religion. The Indians rightly see that man has a relationship to God; but what they say about this relationship (Witte has in mind here the identity of man with the Absolute as taught in the *Advaita-Vedānta*) is "the most monstrous aberration, perversion and depravity, consequently disaster and ruin, not liberation and redemption, but the gravest curse."³¹ Similar judgements are made also about the Hindu doctrine of incarnation. As regards Buddhism too, Witte concedes that there is in it a presentiment of the existence of God; but what Buddhism attempts to say about God is completely wrong.

In addition to exposing and establishing his own theological view of religions, our Berlin missiologist refutes, in a long Appendix to his book (pp. 247-279) the views of some theologians of his time—R. Seeberg, M. Keebler, P. Althaus, J. Richter, M. Schlunk, H.W. Schomerus, K. Heim and E. Brunner—all of whom had admitted, in varying degrees, a certain divine revelation and certain elements of truth in all religions. These had, moreover, admitted that these existed between these religions and Christianity a positive relation capable of further development and fulfilment.

At the end of his study Witte comes to the following conclusion : "All religions of man are error and wrong way, hence corruption. Only in Christ is God and therefore only in the Message of Christ there is salvation for the world."³² He further remarks : "The religions of

31. *Ibid.* pp. 177-178.

32. *Ibid.* p. 246.

men are not only imperfect and deformed but also totally wrong and perverted and only corruption. There is in them no relation to God in any way nor is there any real awareness of God as awareness of *God*. Nor are they 'brought about by God'.³³ Or again: "In the preaching of the world religious there are no elements of truth and no revelation, but, as Luther says, only night and darkness."³⁴

In his booklet *Offenbarung nur in der Bibel*, Witte reiterates the views he had expressed in his *Die Christus-Botschaft und die Religionen*. The epithets he uses to describe religions in the earlier work recur here too. To the question whether there is revelation in history our author answers that God has revealed himself in history, but *only* in the salvation history of the Jewish people. For no other history than that of the Jewish people has found its clear termination in the history of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The conclusion he comes to at the end of the book is clearly indicated by the title itself; for he says: "Only in the Bible there is revelation of God, which has taken place in the salvation history. . . . Nowhere else has revelation become a reality for men, nowhere else is it possible."³⁵

The question whether Witte admits any relation between the Christian revelation and the non-Christian religions or whether there is a "point of contact" between the Word of God and what a non-Christian already knows need hardly be posed. For the antithesis between the Christian revelation and the other religions is so strongly emphasized by him that there can be no relation, at least in a positive sense, between them. Religions are degraded to the status of mere artefacts of the phantasy of fallen man, purely human attempts to know and to attain God, but with no relation to the living God. In such a conception, there is no place at all for the idea that these religions can be considered as a *praeparatio evangelica* or that Christianity perfects or 'fulfils' the deepest aspirations of these religions. For our author writes: "The religions are error and wrong way, offence and corruption. Men are blind, they have falsehood instead of truth. They are dead and they know nothing of God, absolutely nothing. There is nothing there to 'fulfil'."³⁶ As the only answer to the question of the relation of Christian revelation to non-Christian religions, Witte

33. *Ibid.* p. 259.

34. *Ibid.* p. 272.

35. J. Witte, *Offenbarung nur in der Bibel* (Goettingen: 1937), p. 33.

36. *Ibid.* p. 21.

observes: "But the Message of Christ considers none of these religions as relative truth and consequently as preliminary stage and as preparation for the religion of Christ, but sees in their preaching only human error and wrong way which leads to corruption, to eternal loss."³⁷ Only the religion of the Old Testament can be considered as preliminary stage and preparation for the Message of Christ: "There is only *one* preliminary stage and preparation of the Message of Christ, namely the preparatory words of God through the prophets of the Old Testament. Only here in the Old and New Testaments has God spoken. In all other religions, even in the world religions, God has not spoken. In them it is not God who speaks to men, but it is erring men who speak erring things there concerning questions of religion."³⁸

With such a theological outlook it is quite understandable that Witte repudiates any "point of contact" between the Word of God and the religions. Criticizing Brunner, who had advocated such a "point of contact", Witte writes: "The natural man understands nothing about the spirit of God. It is for him a foolishness. He *cannot* know it. . . . Man has so completely lost his power of understanding that all that God says is foolishness to him. Even the power of understanding must be given to him anew by God. . . . Men are, in their sins, not only apparently dead, but really dead. God must raise them anew to life from complete death. He does this in the Message of Christ through the Holy Ghost in his Word."³⁹ It is equally understandable that our author finds fault with the Church Fathers who had advocated the doctrine of *logos spermaticos* in order to explain the presence of truth and some knowledge of God in the pagan religions.⁴⁰

The extremely negativistic view of religions as an artifact of sinful man without any relation to God is—it goes without saying—against a true understanding of the teaching of the Bible, even if Witte claims that he bases his conclusions on the New Testament. As was to be expected, his views attracted more critics than admirers and had hardly any influence on the later theological thought.

37. J. Witte, *Die Christus-Botschaft*. . . p. 11.

38. *Ibid.* p. 34.

39. *Ibid.* p. 278.

40. *Ibid.* pp. 45-51.

IV

Concluding remarks

Space does not permit us to make an evaluation of the views of these theologians. However, two general observations may be made.

Firstly, when we evaluate the standpoint of these dialectical theologians we should keep in mind the trend in the Protestant theology of their time. It is only against the background of the relativism of liberal theology concerning Christian revelation that we should judge the attitude of these theologians. Without in any way trying to justify their standpoint, we would like to point out that all of them were motivated by a special concern, namely, to vindicate the uniqueness of Christian revelation, which was being gradually lost sight of or at least not sufficiently insisted upon. But, while emphasizing this truth, they went to an extreme, some of them going to the extent of denying to the non-Christian religions all divine revelation and reducing them to the status of mere human artifacts. Such an exclusivistic position is not only theologically weak but also unacceptable. The fact that the dialectical theology was not destined to endure for a long period is already one sign of its weakness.

Secondly, it is important to note that the dialectical theologians we have considered here are not to be put on the same level; they disagreed among themselves on several points. As we said, Barth and Brunner had strong theological differences which led to a theological breach between them. In the same manner, Witte, who seems to have held the extremest standpoint, strongly criticized Brunner. Among the theologians we considered here it is Brunner that represented a moderate standpoint in the attitude of dialectical theology towards the non-Christian religions. Some of his views can be fruitfully utilized, with the necessary modifications, even by missiologists and theologians of religions of our own days.