

Lecture 4: The modern critique of theistic belief

- D.L. Edwards, *Religion and Change* London 1969
- K. Barth, *Protestant Theology in the 19th Century – its Background and History*, London 1972
- J.C. Livingstone (ed.), *Modern Christian Thought*, vol.1, Minneapolis, MN 2006

Introduction

- Atheism is a product of the Christian world in Western Europe.
- It is part of a wider phenomenon: pluralisation and individualisation of religious options.
- Two main theological responses:
 - A) Preservation of theology's universal claim at the price of giving up on specific characteristics
 - B) Maintaining the specific character of theology by giving up on its claim to universal validity.

1. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

- *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781, 2nd edn 1787
- A. Wood, *Kant's Rational Theology*
- K. Barth, *Protestant Theology in the 19th Century*, chapter on Kant

Kant II

- Historical background:
- Rationalism (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz)
- Philosophy leads to rational theology, specifically the ontological argument.
- Construction of a 'natural theology' on the basis of those insights.

Kant III

- Influence of David Hume (1711-1776): Cognition always based on sense-perception.
- In his first *Critique* (1781) Kant studies human cognition.
- Result: Cognition always involves rationality and sense-perception.
- The senses produce the 'material', mind provides the 'form'.

Kant IV

- Consequence: No cognition without the possibility of sense-perception.
- → God cannot be an object of cognition.
- Result: Metaphysical knowledge of God is excluded
- How then can God be known?
- Only path to God is *practice*.
- Existence of God is 'postulate of practical reason'.

2. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872)

- *Essence of Christianity* (1841) online at:
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/essence/>
- K. Ameriks (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, final ch.
- W. Breckmann, *Marx, The Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory*, ch. on Feuerbach
- K. Barth, *Protestant Theology in the 19th Century*, ch. on Feuerbach (important for Barth's own theology!)

Feuerbach II

- Basic idea: religion is projection:
- God does not make man in his image, man makes God.
- Not a projection though of the individual man, but of ideal, universal man.
- All religions are inherently anthropomorphic.
- Theological attempts to purge this notion of God are rejected as 'a subtle, devious kind of atheism'.

Feuerbach III

- If all the attributes, then, are human, there is no reason there is a transcendent subject to them.
- From Essence of Christianity (§ 2):
- ‘What is God to man, that is man’s own spirit, man’s own soul; what is man’s spirit, soul, and heart – that is his God. God is the manifestation of man’s inner nature, his expressed self; religion is the solemn unveiling of man’s hidden treasures, the avowal of his innermost thoughts, the open confession of the secrets of his love.’

Major Points

- Modern critique has not led to the abandonment of theology but it raises important questions.
- How can we know of and speak about God given that our metaphysical attempts to establish his existence inevitably fail (Kant)?
- How can we make sure the God who is discussed is not merely a projection (Feuerbach)?
- How have theologians responded to those?

3. Karl Barth's early doctrine of God

- K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1919, 2nd edn. 1922 (ET: 1968).
- 'If I have a system it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: 'God is in heaven and you art on earth.' (*Epistle to the Romans*, 10).
- Barth's major concern is thinking about God.
- Rejection of theology based on human religiosity.
- First phase: dialectical theology - emphasising the absolute difference between human and divine.

Barth II

- Being what we are, human beings in the world, we cannot hope to have escaped the 'religious possibility'. [...] We may storm from one room into another, but not out of the house into the open. We may understand, however, that even this final, inescapable possibility [i.e. religion] is, even in its most daring, most acute, strongest, 'most impossible' variants a *human* possibility ... (*Epistle to the Romans*)

Barth III

- *Three Kantian ideas:*

1. We cannot transcend our cognitive limit.
2. We have to confine ourselves to the realm of experience.
3. Yet we can at least be aware of this situation - there is room for an epistemological critique.

- This Kantian epistemology is also the basis of Barth's theological critique of 'religion'.
- Kant's critique leads Barth to a strong emphasis on revelation.
- Contrast revelation - natural theology is key.

From *Church Dogmatics* I/2

- *One cannot say of the obviously existent religious capacity of man that it is, as it were, the general form of human cognition, which then receives its proper and true contents in revelation and in faith. On the contrary, we are dealing with a contradiction: within religion the human being rebels against, and cuts himself off from, revelation by obtaining for himself a substitute for it, by taking for himself what should be given to him by God through revelation.*

Barth V

- Barth's approach stands in the tradition of 'negative theology'.
- However: for Barth only the acceptance of the revelation in Christ avoids 'natural theology'.
- Nietzsche's 'nihilism' is accepted for a world without revelation.
- Yet the full force of the 'nihilism' of a god-less world can only be born if one knows that this isn't the final word.
- Thus revelation is in one sense inevitable.
- In its dichotomy of bottom-up vs. top-down approach Barth's theology is post-Kantian.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

- D Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 1997.
- A God who 'exists' does not exist.
- I.e. there is no God who primarily exists.
- *What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world? (Letters and Papers from Prison).*
- Concept of 'religionless world' is difficult:
- Does it mean 'secularisation'?

Bonhoeffer II

- Approach to God through Christ leads to the paradox that God is present where he seems to be absent.
- God of traditional religion avoids this troubling truth by locating God in the transcendent realm.
- There is some hope in decline of religion.

Bonhoeffer III

- Still: major difference between Bonhoeffer and 60s liberals.
- For Bonhoeffer, the 'godless world' is the reality of 1944 - no reason to celebrate.
- Christians have to accept it according to Jesus' word:
- 'Take up the cross and follow me.' (Mt 10, 38)

Bonhoeffer IV

- [Religious man] must therefore live in the godless world, without attempting to gloss over or explain its ungodliness in some religious way or other. To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) on the basis of some method or other, but to be a man--not a type of man, but the man that Christ creates in us. It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. Letters and Papers from Prison