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## THE MODERNIST THEORY OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

Professor CASPAR WISTAR HODGE, Ph.D.

(Princeton Seminary)



MODERNISM as a theological movement is the result of a philosophy, or perhaps of a number of different philosophical systems. But any system of philosophy or metaphysics, if it is to claim any validity or truth must rest upon a theory of knowledge. Modernist theology can claim no exemption from the necessity of a critical theory of knowledge; it cannot say—here is my theology, here is the philosophy at its basis, and then try to escape a theory of knowledge which can justify its fundamental principles.

Nor does Modernism usually in its best representatives attempt to avoid such a theory of knowledge. On the contrary it proclaims such a theory and when we examine it, we find it to be the anti-intellectualism which has been so predominant in religious thought since Kant and Schleiermacher, and which still seems to dominate in America, though signs are not wanting, as Professor Brunner of Zurich has indicated, that this wave of anti-intellectualism in many quarters has reached its height and is beginning to wane. As long as it is supposed to support religious life and even belief, it is popular; but when its logical results in scepticism as to the objects of religious beliefs and the validity of these beliefs are clearly seen, then enthusiasm for it begins to cool and questions begin to arise as to whether we can dethrone the intellect, banish it from religion, and retain any objectively valid religious faith.

In the present crisis, it is well for the Christian Church to know what Modernism is in its fundamental principles.

One of its underlying principles is the denial of any external authority in religious knowledge, and the assertion that religion and Christianity are a life, not a doctrine. The outcry against authoritative doctrine is not new of course. It has been fashionable for years. To realize this one need only recall the dispute between Dreyer and Professor Kaftan of Berlin in 1888-90, and then turn to the recent remarks on the subject by Professor Wernle in his "Introduction to the Study of Theology", in 1921. It has been said and is being said that all doctrine is dead and constitutes too heavy a burden for religion to bear. One would not need to take this outcry against doctrine very seriously, as Professor Ihmels of Leipsic once said, if it came only from those

who were hostile to religion and Christianity. The seriousness of the matter results from the fact that it is usually in the interest of religious and Christian faith that authoritative doctrine is to be banished as a burden too heavy to be borne. The idea is that doctrine is killing religion and Christianity, that they consist in life, not in doctrine. The essential thing, then, in both natural religion and in Christianity is experience and life, we are told, and that the "outworn frame-works", to use Dr. Fosdick's phrase, must be discarded and new ones discovered which shall better symbolize the Christian life and experience.

This, of course, is the natural result of the old rationalism which also gave up all external authority in religious knowledge. The "kernel" of rational truth, which rationalism supposed was clothed in temporally conditioned form in Christian doctrine, being thus temporally conditioned, afforded no permanency for Christianity. Hence in Germany Dreyer, and in France Sabatier, demanded an undogmatic Christianity. Doctrines are only the symbols which clothe or express Christian life, and are outgrowths of that life, having thus no permanent objective truth or validity. In America Dr. Fosdick has described Christian doctrines as merely the intellectual frameworks of an abiding Christian experience. The frame-works change while the life abides. The life can fold up the old frameworks and cast them aside as a garment, clothing itself anew with new garments which too will one day be outworn and cast away.

This view seems to have a great attraction for the so-called modern mind. Once a man is liberated from binding beliefs, he may resort to the easy philosophy of pragmatism or sink in what the late Dr. Kuyper called the "bog of mysticism".

But let us ask ourselves seriously what are the results of this theory of religious knowledge, for a theory of knowledge it is, and as such cannot escape critical investigation.

(a) In the first place we must give up Christianity. When we have separated Christianity from all facts, and regard its doctrines as only the product of religious life, we have done away with Christianity altogether, because we have done away with everything which distinguishes Christianity from the natural religious sentiment of man. Of course, it is true that Christianity is a life. It is also true that Christian doctrine cannot produce this life. Paul taught this ages before the Modernist. Man is dead in sin, and the revelation of divine truth will fail to produce life, because the natural (sinful) man receiveth not the things of the Spirit (I Cor. 2:14).

But the Modernist does not mean this. He means to say that the essence of Christianity consists in a life which precedes, and is independent of, the Christian facts and doctrines, and that doctrine is the product of life, and is merely symbolic, i. e. not objectively valid or true. This leaves nothing but the bare religious

sentiment of men, and it is a grave error to suppose that Christianity is the product of man's religious sentiment. Christian life is produced by the Holy Spirit, but it rests on the facts and doctrines of Christ's redemptive work contained in the New Testament.

(b) Furthermore, even supposing that we did violence to any historically justifiable idea of Christianity, and identified it arbitrarily with a mystic life, we would have no basis for affirming either the finality or truth of Christianity. For this life might attain supposedly higher levels and need more elevated doctrinal symbols in which to clothe itself. The Modernist sometimes affirms that Christian life is the product of God's Spirit and so is final. But in so doing they abandon their position by asserting a great doctrine which is not the product or clothing of the Christian life, but which is its condition. Nor can it be proved that this life is the *true* life if the norm of truth be drawn in pragmatic fashion from the life. For this supposedly Christian life contains no norms of truth. Christian life is the true life because it depends on Christ's redemption applied to the individual by the Holy Spirit. But here are asserted great facts and doctrines of the New Testament, independent of our Christian life, and at its basis.

In a word, if Christianity is separated from the great supernatural facts and truths of the New Testament, then all that differentiates it from the natural religious sentiment is gone, and we have no Christianity left.

(c) But we cannot stop here. This theory of religious knowledge involves complete religious scepticism as regards our knowledge of God. Man's natural religious sentiment or religious consciousness depends upon an idea or doctrine of God antecedent to the religious consciousness and conditioning it. Everything which characterizes the religious sentiment as religious, depends upon an idea of its object—God. But according to this theory of knowledge, the idea of God is only a symbol. It has, and can have, no objective truth or validity. Hence the man who adopts this position cannot really believe in God. Complete religious scepticism results. Belief in God involves some knowledge about God. Great doctrines are presupposed in religious belief. Is there a God? Can God be known? How can God be known? Has He revealed Himself in nature, the human mind, and Scripture? Without answers to these great doctrinal questions belief in God is impossible. The old theologians used to say that faith consisted in knowledge, assent, and trust. In every act of faith there abideth these three—knowledge, assent, trust. No doubt the greatest of these is trust. But just as love, though greater, according to Paul, than faith and hope, is nevertheless dependent on faith and hope, just so, trust is always dependent on knowledge and assent. Once affirm that life and experience precede doctrine, complete scepticism must result. Nothing objectively true about God can be affirmed. Dr. Fosdick, for

example, in his Cole Lecture, following Sabatier, clearly acknowledges that his own religious ideas or doctrines may not be valid for the next generation. This does away with all truth, for truth knows no past, present, or future. What is true is true for all time and everywhere.

(d) But this position which we are examining critically not only involves complete religious scepticism. It cuts deeper. It must do away with all norms of truth. The distinction between right and wrong, this is an idea, a doctrine, a truth. Call them by what name you please, right and wrong are ideas or valid doctrines which condition moral life and conduct. All life and experience are conditioned by norms of truth which are not contained in the life itself, but must be obtained from either reason or revelation.

(e) And this is not all. If this theory of knowledge be true scepticism in natural science must follow. If all our categories of scientific knowledge are the product of sensation and feeling, they too have only symbolic validity, and we are overwhelmed by a complete scepticism in every sphere of knowledge, as T. H. Green of Oxford abundantly proved when he refuted the sceptic Hume in his Introduction to the latter's Essay Concerning the Human Understanding.

It is no wonder then, as Professor Brunner remarks, that in Europe the zeal for this anti-intellectualism has begun to cool. Unfortunately, however, we are usually behind the times in America. We realize, of course, that Modernists do not usually follow the logic of their position. They are fortunately inconsistent. Dr. Bavinck in his Reformed Dogmatics recalls the case of the Pietists who decried doctrine and yet sought to convert children to Christianity by use of the catechism. Of course they did. How could they convert anyone without telling the old, old story of Jesus and His love which led Him to die on the Cross for our sins. But this old, old story is of course just Christian doctrine, New Testament doctrine.

Other classes of Modernists, no doubt, would repudiate this entire theory of knowledge, and make reason their authority in religious knowledge. Then they become rationalists, substituting religious philosophy for the Christian revelation. But we think their number is not so large as those who adhere in a more or less consistent way to the theory which we have been criticizing. Very likely there are many Modernists of all classes who refuse to follow the logic of their fundamental presuppositions and principles. But the laws of logic are stubborn things, just as stubborn as facts. To abandon logic is to abandon the laws of human thought, and to do this is to commit intellectual suicide. Sooner or later the flood of scepticism will burst through the dams of religious sentiment and overwhelm any Church that accepts the Modernist theory of knowledge.