

## Europe Needs to Search for God

Martin Luther once asked: "How can I get a gracious God?" This was the decisive question for his time. But who today would seriously ask whether God was gracious to him? The majority of modern men, including many theologians, are not anxious about their salvation in the world to come, but about their well-being in this world. A direct experience with the divine is not one of their foremost concerns.

The modern German theologian, Dorothea Sölle, who has become famous for her political theology, doesn't believe in the resurrection of Christ and is not interested in Christ's second coming on the last day.

Sölle and Luther are dramatically different from each other. Luther was still steeped in Scripture, accepting it as God's inerrant Word. Sölle is the symbol of modern theology's new interpretation of faith and Scripture. She shows greater affinity with humanism, Marxism, and other horizontal world and life views, than with religious experience. What has led to this enormous gap between Luther and Sölle?

In previous articles I have referred to the Enlightenment. Once Enlightenment was under way in Europe, when unbridled rationalism became king, a liberal and critical tradition began to develop among Christian thinkers. They slowly began to accept the findings of natural science of their day, without turning their criticism upon the presuppositions of that science.

The theory of evolution was no longer contested. Man found himself as one more outgrowth of a tiny planetary matter. He was no longer unique. Since he was not the image-bearer of God, his existence was explained as the results of purely mechanical and natural causes. The miraculous was denied. In course of time men came to believe that they had no experience of anything real but the physical world; and the foundations were laid for the problems and constant confusion of modern theology.

Optimism abounded. By the end of the last century, nearly all educated Europeans were convinced that man had reached the limits of knowledge of the world. What is there still to learn? The mechanistic point of view had become generally accepted. It was believed that man, by the exercise of his reason, had seized upon the truth. Man had become of age. Religion could now be shed. It had become needless baggage in a universe, in which there was no place for God. Man was evolving upward. He was making progress in every field. Everyone was waiting for the dawn of the bright new day that would surely come with the ushering in of the 20th century.

Historically, the 20th century began in 1914 with the outbreak of the First World War. The same held true for theology. Twentieth century theology began with Karl Barth. He broke with pre-war liberalism and became known as the leader of the Dialectical Theology. Many profound insights mark his works. He exalted the sovereignty of God. However, his understanding of Scripture was not orthodox, but was coloured by his reading of Kierkegaard's existentialism and Dostoevsky's pessimism.

Rudolph Bultmann was the pioneer of "Form Criticism." He believed that theology needed a philosophical basis and found it in the existentialism of Martin Heidegger, who was lecturer at Marburg from 1923 to 1928, the same school where Bultmann had his long teaching tenure from 1921 to 1951.

Bultmann was convinced that if the Bible and Christian history are to say anything to modern existential man, they must be made understandable and palatable to them by the now famous process of demythologizing. This means that the Bible must be stripped of the humanly fabricated language of myth, which was simply an unsophisticated, outdated, pre-scientific way of looking at things. Biblical stories must be reinterpreted to eliminate all suggestion that anything concrete happened. Miracles were explained away.

Bultmann didn't write for the common man. His views and those of his followers were expected to be understood by theologians and their followers. And they in turn were to shape people's beliefs. The school of Bultmann debunked the message of orthodoxy for the sake of reaching modern man. But the appeal was not accepted by the educated European. An American living in Belgium remarked about Bultmann's influence: "Preaching that de-mythologizes the Bible also empties the churches."

The "post-Bultmannian" school has more to offer than Bultmann himself. They believe that there is more to say about Jesus than merely that He existed. Gerhard Ebeling at Zurich said in *Word and Faith*: "The fact that we cannot, as the 18th and 19th centuries imagined, reconstruct from the sources a biography of Jesus surely must not be confused with the idea that the historical Jesus is completely hidden from us behind the New Testament witness and totally unknown to us."

Contemporary theology aids the development of Europe's spiritual wasteland. Why should people listen when the trumpet doesn't give a certain sound? Many churches stand empty or are poorly attended because leaders have rejected the faith of the fathers. Europe needs another Luther, who dares to raise the question, despite all modern theology's opposition: "How can I get a gracious God?"

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