

CHAPTER IV

THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF MAN

(a) THE WORD OF GOD AS THE SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

I. KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT PRESUPPOSITIONS?

ONE of the most important chapters in Jakob Burckhardt's *Kultur der Renaissance* bears the pregnant title: 'The Discovery of Man.' In point of fact the men of the Renaissance, that is, the leading minds in the art, philosophy and science of that day, were filled with the proud consciousness that they had either discovered man, or that they were about to do so. It is true of course that even in the Middle Ages man was in the centre of thought, but the 'man' of that day was not man as he really is, but—so ran the agreed criticism of medieval anthropology—man as he was conceived, postulated, believed to be. His actuality was concealed under the speculations of metaphysical philosophy, the dogmas of the Church or the mythologies of the Bible. The thinkers of the Renaissance felt it incumbent upon them to clear away all this rubbish, just as they felt it incumbent upon them to set nature, in its reality, free from the trammels of the teaching of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. In both instances the programme was understood in the same sense: a knowledge of reality which was empirical, free from all presuppositions, non-metaphysical and non-theological.¹ The task begun then by a few thinkers was carried forward by others in the centuries which followed, and, with the aid of a vast scientific apparatus, the thinkers of the nineteenth century tried to complete it, the task, namely, of constructing an empirical anthropology and psychology, a direct, unambiguous knowledge of man as he actually is, based on a knowledge which is free from all presuppositions.

When we look back over the path that has been trodden for these past four hundred years, and when we weigh up the

¹ Cf. Dilthey, *Ges. Schriften*, II, especially *Die Funktion der Anthropologie in der Kultur des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 416 ff.

result of these gigantic efforts, the comparison between that which has been attained and that which was expected is absolutely grotesque; at any rate, at the best it has a very sobering effect. While natural science moved forward from one revolutionary discovery to another, the knowledge of man—apart from that of his body as a part of nature as a whole—has not made progress in essentials, although it has done so at particular points. The psychological laboratories of our universities, which were opened fifty years ago with the highest expectations, and even twenty years ago were full of activity, are to-day deserted, and passers-by merely glance at them with gentle amusement. Why has the programme of a science free from all presuppositions, which in the one case revolutionized the world, not proved successful in the other? The answer is easy. Because neither in the one case nor in the other was there any real procedure apart from all presuppositions. In both cases men worked on the one and the same presupposition; only in the one instance it was suitable and in the other it was not. In both cases the presupposition which was really operative—although usually people were not aware of this—was that man, like nature, was accessible to the methods of objective-causal research. Modern anthropology was no more ‘free from presuppositions’ than the anthropology of the Middle Ages or of antiquity, only the actual presupposition was different: the parallelism between nature and man, the knowledge of nature and the knowledge of man, proved to be unsuitable for human nature, or at least applicable only to one ‘part’ of human nature. Where this presupposition was effective, that is, in so far as man is really part of the natural world, the anthropology of natural science has gained just as brilliant and amazing and indeed revolutionary results as in any other branch of natural science. Only this knowledge affected the *zoon homo sapiens* rather than the *humanus*, that is, it did not touch the essential element in human nature.

This perception, from the point of view of method, is of the highest significance. It shows that anthropology, even when it desires to be wholly disinterested, cannot be so; indeed, that then in particular it makes specially irrelevant presuppositions, which are remote from its subject. Man is *not* only a part

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of nature; indeed, essentially that is not what he is, and therefore this apparently impartial research, which in reality only applies the presupposition of natural science to this sphere, never touches the essential element in man or in human existence at all. All 'empirical' research is definitely limited when it touches man, for the following reasons: because, whether he is aware of it or not, man is always aspiring after something beyond himself, or perhaps it would be truer to say that he is 'apprehended' by a world beyond himself; because, further, man, in contradistinction from all 'other animals,' is the 'animal' who has ideas, who seeks Beauty, Truth, Goodness, Justice, or the Holy—or else he flees from them—because man has mind and conscience; and, finally, because man is aware of, or at least dreams of, the Infinite, the Perfect, the Absolute. The more that this fact is forgotten by anthropology the more meaningless and misleading will be its results.

Moreover, the empiricism of the period of the Renaissance and of the two succeeding centuries was not 'pure'; that is precisely why, at that time, people were able to see man afresh, and to say all sorts of new things about him. The concept of nature of that day, namely—especially when one spoke of human nature—included within itself such a wealth of determinations, that at the present time they would no longer be reckoned as belonging to 'nature' but either to 'spirit,' to the 'super-sensible,' or to the realm of 'metaphysics.' The idea of nature of those days—at least so far as man was concerned—was still a long way from the physics of Galileo; it was rather that of Stoic philosophy, that 'natural system' whose nature and significance for the whole modern world was first brought home to us by Wilhelm Dilthey.¹ Thus the anthropologists of those days, although they believed that they were working on purely empirical lines, were working

¹ W. Dilthey, op. cit., *Das natürliche System der Geisteswissenschaften im 17. Jahrhundert*, pp. 90–245. Cf. also B. Groethuysen, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, part ii, in the *Handbuch der Philosophie* of Baumeier and Schröter. Dilthey, like Troeltsch, tends to undervalue the influence of Christian ideas, because he is not aware that the Biblical conception of the orders of creation (cf. Matt. xix. 1–8) forms an analogy to the *lex naturae*, and is often concealed under Stoic terminology.

with a fundamental capital of supra-empirical presuppositions which had been bequeathed to them by Plato, Aristotle, Roman Stoicism and also by Christianity, which they calmly included in their 'conception of nature,' and thus in their 'freedom from all presuppositions.' This 'transcendental' element the anthropologists of that day, still supported by the tradition of the previous centuries, imported in a quite naïve way into that which already existed, that which empirically existed of human 'nature.' Thus their picture of man still remained impregnated with humanity. The sharp division, however, which the last two hundred years made between the causal world of nature and all non-causal spiritual existence and transcendence, makes it the more imperative for us to emphasize very clearly that all purely empirical views of man, in the sense of objective science, do not touch man himself, but only the framework of man. The problem is not whether man, in order to be understood, must be seen in the light of that realm beyond, but what this standpoint beyond himself is? The understanding of man always leads us—we may dispose of it as we will—either into the region of metaphysics or into that of faith; whether this metaphysic be that of materialism, idealism or of mystical pantheism, or whether this faith be the Christian faith or some other form of religion.

2. THE PRINCIPLE OF EMPIRICAL CRITICISM

Yet the empiricist reaction of the Renaissance against the dogma and the metaphysic of the Middle Ages contains an element of truth, which we ought not to lose, the principle of criticism in the light of experience. By this we mean that no statement about man, whatever its source, may contradict experience, and, on the other hand, that all that can be learned about man from experience ought to be included in any doctrine of man. This requirement was obviously contradicted by the anthropology of the Middle Ages, in spite of the depth of its knowledge. From the point of view of its theological presuppositions it set up postulates about man which could not be reconciled with the knowledge gained from experience, and up to the present time theological anthropology has done the same. The fact, however, that

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under the cover of 'impartial research' much materialistic metaphysic has been set before an unsuspecting public is equally true and unfortunate; but it does not in any way weaken the postulate of the criticism of experience which is quite formal, and is opposed to all that goes beyond the facts, even from the materialistic point of view. This principle also applies, to the fullest extent, to Christian anthropology, and the Christian doctrine of man should unhesitatingly adopt this principle as its own.

The Christian doctrine of man maintains that, although it understands man from the point of view of the truths of revelation, which are not accessible to experience, yet it does not in any way contradict what can be known of man in and through experience; on the contrary, it incorporates this knowledge gained by experience into its rightful context. The Christian doctrine of man itself requires that all its statements about man—so far as they have any connexion with actual experience at all—should be in harmony with man's 'natural' experimental knowledge, and should indeed absorb it.

At this point, as at all others, the Christian truth includes 'natural' knowledge; this means, all that man can know from observation and thought apart from faith. The Christian does not claim that he has a special brand of mathematics, physics or chemistry, zoology, botany or anatomy. Christian theology operates with the same formal logic as any other science, and in preaching or in teaching the Christian Church depends upon the validity of the psychological laws, like any other body which has something to teach or explain. The old theologians, even our Reformers, summed up this dualism in a simple formula: in secular matters—both in science and in practice—the reason is competent; in spiritual matters, faith.¹ This simple division of labour is useful as a starting-point, but—as we see in ethics, for instance—it contains great dangers. The relations between the 'natural' and the 'spiritual' sphere cannot be presented quite so simply.

¹ Lau, *Ausserliche Ordnung und weltlich Ding in Luthers Theologie*. Above all, Luther's Disputations, especially *De homine*, 1536, and the disputations about the graduation of *Palladius* and *Tilemann* in Drew's *Disputationen Dr. Martin Luthers*, pp. 90 ff., 110 ff.