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Otto William Heick

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IN MEMORY OF KONRAD VON HOFMANN, 1810-1877

Otto W. Heick

Although Konrad von Hofmann, the founder of the Erlangen theology, ranks foremost among the Lutheran theologians of Europe of the last century, his name is little known on this side of the Atlantic. The brief article on him in the *Lutheran Cyclopedia* is wholly unsatisfactory. John T. Mueller curtly dismisses him as "the father (?) of modern subjective theology (Ichtheologie)" who "denied Christ's vicarious satisfaction and taught the pagan theology of salvation without the redemptive work of Christ."¹

Only two English publications are of real value for an objective study of Hofmann: his lectures on hermeneutics, translated by Christian Preuss and published under the title *Interpreting the Bible*² and Gerhard Forde's *The Law-Gospel Debate, an Interpretation of its Historical Development*.³ Although the Scandinavian theological tradition of the nineteenth century stands in direct succession to the Erlangen school (Gisle Johnson and others), Preuss says, it may seem strange that the immigrants of the last century did not bring along with them Hofmann's method of "teaching the old truth in a new garb." The same applies to the Germans settling in the American Mid-West. Yet many of their leaders, he says, arrived in America before the significance of the Erlangen theology became generally known; consequently, they seized upon the nearest weapon on hand for combating their common foe, rationalism, by turning to the intellectual orthodoxy of the seventeenth century.⁴ However, one must not forget that both in Germany and Norway the old theology was given a new lease on life by such scholars as E.W. Hengstenberg and C.P. Caspari who had a large following in both countries. With respect to the American situation, Preuss remarks that the former United Lutheran Church was an exception

1. *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), p. 3.

2. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959.)

3. *Ibid.* 1969.

4. Preuss, p. XII.

to what he had said above. Most likely he had in mind the controversy over the Scriptures in the first half of the twentieth century in which the president of the United Lutheran Church, F.H. Knobel and C.M. Jacobs of Mount Airy Seminary were pitted against Michael Reu of the German Synod of Iowa and H.G. Stub, leader of the Norwegian Lutherans. In the spirit of Hofmann the authors of the *Baltimore Declaration*, 1938, interpreted the Word of God in historical categories. The Word is the revelation of God, at the beginning of history, reaching its fullness in the life and work of Jesus Christ. This revelation is faithfully recorded in Scripture. "We therefore accept the Scriptures as the infallible truth of God in all matters that pertain to his revelation and our salvation."⁵ The Constitution of the Lutheran Church in America, 1962, affirms this Christ-centred and soteriological character of the Scriptures "as normative for the faith and life of the church."⁶ The American Lutheran Church, on the other hand, in proximity to the *Brief Statement* of the Missouri Synod, 1932, defined the Scriptures "in all their parts as the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God."⁷ In retrospect, one ought to remember that the LCA stands in organic historical relation to the experience theology of the older "American Lutheranism" for whose leaders a "living faith" was more important than the idea of an "inerrant" book. Samuel Sprecher, for example, heralded Schleiermacher's theology of the Christian consciousness as a return to the Reformation. "Notwithstanding his errors and heresies in other respects", to Schleiermacher belongs "the immortal honour", he says, "of having clearly and scientifically recognized the inseparable connection of systematic theology with a living faith."⁸ This was also Hofmann's concern.

Born December 21, 1810 at Nuremberg, Hofmann died at Erlangen December 20, 1877. As a student at Erlangen (1827-28) he experienced a conversion to a genuine evangelical piety. In 1829 he went to Berlin where the historian Leopold von Ranke exerted a stronger influence on him than either Schleiermacher or Hengstenberg. Later Schelling became important for him also. In 1838 Hofmann began his teaching career at Erlangen. Four years later he went to Rostock in Northern Germany. He returned to Erlangen in 1845 to teach various subjects, mainly in the field of New Testament studies. He also became active in politics. For a number of years he was a member of the Bavarian parliament, representing the liberal party.

Hofmann's contribution to Christian theology centers chiefly around four topics: (1) Scripture, (2) religious experience, (3) the atonement, and (4) eschatology.

SCRIPTURE

The theologians of the seventeenth century conceived of revelation as a divine verbal communication of things which are necessary for men to salvation. Revelation and Scripture were identified. The historical events recorded in the Bible reced-

5. Richard Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 358.

6. *Ibid.* pp. 566 f.

7. *Ibid.* p. 533.

8. Samuel Sprecher, *The Groundwork of a System of Evangelical Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1879), p. 180.

ed into the background. As God's own Book, the Bible was considered to be inerrant in every respect. Inspiration included even the Hebrew vowel-point. The Greek of the New Testament was said to be free from common linguistic and stylistic colloquialisms. Thus the Bible stood out as a book *sui generis* and as such demanded the respect of the interpreter.⁹

This view of Scripture was challenged in the Age of Rationalism. The classical scholar and theologian J.A. Ernesti maintained, in 1761, that the principles of classical scholarship should also be applied to the interpretation of the Bible. He was supported in his historical and grammatical approach to the Bible by J.S. Semler at Halle. Since this method, consistently applied, tended to destroy the religious authority of the Bible,¹⁰ the Awakening in the nineteenth century reacted sharply to this kind of Biblical criticism. In order to restore the authority of the Bible the "Theologians of Repristinatio", such as E.W. Hengstenberg and C.P. Caspari, tried to revive the method of the Lutheran orthodoxy of the seventeenth century. While they met with limited success in Germany and Scandinavia, their view of Scripture became normative in North America for the Missouri Synod in whose midst it was never seriously challenged until the present time.

Unlike Hengstenberg and his followers, Hofmann was ready to use the method of historical and literary criticism. His significance lies in the fact that he did it without surrendering the faith of the church in the Bible as the book through which God mediates his redemptive work in Christ Jesus. The interpreter must be a member of the church whose faith he shares through personal religious experience. The Bible originated within the context of a *Heilsgeschichte*, a succession of historical acts effecting the redemption of mankind. It is "a product of a history which forms the basis for the actual life of the church."¹¹ Revelation is accomplished by historical events whose meaning is disclosed by the spoken, inspired word. The word of Christ is not primarily doctrine but an act. "In Christ's self-manifestation to the world we have both history and prophecy: history of the continued establishment of the communion between God and man, prophecy in the continual pointing to the final form of that communion."¹²

The understanding of revelation as "redemptive history" became normative for Hofmann's view of inspiration. Since revelation occurred in the ancient Near East, inevitably the various books of the Bible reflect the cultural life-style of their authors. The Bible, therefore, is not an "errorless" book in every field of natural science that it may accidentally touch upon, as the orthodox maintain. In Scripture "that which belongs to the created order of things is the object of our natural knowledge and experience, whereas the certainty of faith applies only to those things which are objects of faith."¹³

It is a misunderstanding, he said, "to interpret Genesis according to the most

9. Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*; trans. by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs. 3rd revised edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 25 ff.

10. Preuss, Forward by Otto Piper, p. V.

11. Preuss, p. 29.

12. *Weissagung und Erfuellung im Alten und Neuem Testament*. Part I (1841), p. 40.

13. Preuss, p. 64. Hofmann anticipated Paul Tillich by almost a century when the latter also said that things of the natural order which are unknown today, but which might possibly be known

recent investigation of natural science, or to interpret natural science according to Genesis." The creation story is not concerned with the length of the Six Days. The believer must not attempt to learn from Genesis 1 how much time it took to create the world.¹⁴ When Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, "this has nothing to do with the Copernican system".¹⁵

Likewise, the Hebrew words for spirit (*ruach*) and soul (*nephesh*) and their respective equivalents in Greek (*pneuma*, *psyche*) are not to be interpreted "as if they were found in a textbook of psychology." Instead they express, "by means of a common language, what has to be said concerning man's relationship to God and the world."¹⁶

Many tragic conflicts could have been avoided, or could even now be avoided, if the Lutherans on this continent had been prepared or were at least now prepared to take seriously Hofmann's insight into the nature of revelation. The real difference among American Lutherans and among American Protestants in general is over the meaning of Scripture. Fundamentalists, Lutheran and non-Lutheran, are bound to uphold a teaching of "plenary inspiration" which regards every statement in Scripture as a scientific divine truth. It may indeed be reasonably simple to defend the age of the universe as presented in Genesis for the ordinary person untrained in cosmology. Yet the current practice of heart transplant is convincing proof that Jesus did not speak in medical terms when he said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts" (Matt. 15:19). The Lord's language was culturally conditioned just as is the case with us today when we say that we learn a poem "by heart". For the transplanted heart does not provide the recipient with the intellectual capacity of the donor. His mind remains unaffected. Scientifically speaking, intelligent thought originates not in the heart but rather in the brain.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

As stated above, the Fundamentalists' concern for an "inerrant" Bible is rooted in their teaching of inspiration. As God's own book, how could the Bible contain an "error"? Is God not omniscient? One "false" statement would undermine its credibility. The Bible is perfect because God is perfect. Its rational perfection is the means by which Fundamentalists try to verify the saving message of the Bible.

Hofmann changed all this. For verification he turned to religious experience. His approach has an existential ring, for experience involves the whole man. It is the experience of regeneration which assures the individual of the truth of the Bible and which makes him an obedient member of the church. Faith, in the eyes of Hofmann, is "a personal communion between God and man mediated through Christ Jesus."¹⁷ Hofmann definitely distinguishes between faith and theology as a per-

tomorrow are not a matter of the mystery of the revelation. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (1951), p. 109.

14. *Ibid.* p. 66.

15. *Ibid.* pp. 66f.

16. Preuss, p. 64 ff., the whole chapter on "Natural Knowledge and the Witness of Scripture".

17. *Der Schriftbeweis*, 2 vols. 1852 ff. Vol. I, 26.

son's interpretation of Christianity. One's theology is conditioned by one's individual personality. A book on theology is a kind of autobiography. Of necessity, it reflects the author's confessional, educational and historical environment. On the other hand, there is but one faith which the individual has in common with all believers. For this approach Hofmann and his colleague in Erlangen, F.H.R. von Frank, were charged with religious subjectivism, especially by Missouri Synod theologians such as Francis Pieper and John Theodore Mueller.¹⁸ They dismissed the Erlangen theology as just another version of the teachings of Schleiermacher. However, they overlooked a fundamental difference between Hofmann and Schleiermacher. Unlike Schleiermacher, Hofmann does not regard religious self-consciousness as a source of dogmatics. For him it is the Holy Spirit's way of assuring the individual of the divine truth of the Bible. Christian experience is never self-generated. It is a communal experience by which one is incorporated into the church. The historical revelation is "present" in the experience of the believer.¹⁹

THE ATONEMENT

The Erlangen theology was an attempt to update confessional Lutheranism by bringing it into the thought-world of the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on history (Hegel, Schelling, von Ranke) and psychology (Schleiermacher). These idealists had in common a more optimistic view of human nature and a more benign view of the Deity than the theologians of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods. Critics of Hofmann were inclined to see his teaching on the Atonement as a concession to these contemporary tendencies. A brief resume of the orthodox teaching of the atonement may be helpful to understand the trend in Hofmann's view of the reconciling work of Christ.

The key of the orthodox position is the place which the Law holds in its system. God is not only merciful, they said, but also supremely just. His love is not absolute but ordinate, presupposing his wrath. The love of God cannot act unless satisfaction has been made to his wrath through his Son who from eternity offered himself as a mediator between God and men. On the cross Jesus suffered eternal death yet not "eternally", since his suffering belonged to the limited time of his humiliation. In order, therefore, that the price of our redemption might be proportionate to our guilt it was necessary that his divine nature should concur so that his sufferings should acquire the power of infinite worth. Thus the teaching of the *communicatio idiomatum* was of eminently practical significance to the orthodox fathers.²⁰

Hofmann rejected this legal scheme as if God, having gotten his "pound of flesh", now not only can but rather must forgive: withholding forgiveness is evidently unfair in any situation when the debt has been fully paid.²¹ In his teaching Hof-

18. Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I (1950). pp. 114 ff.; Mueller, as quoted above.

19. Forde, pp. 12-35.

20. Schmid, pp. 346 ff.

21. See the Bornholmer theology on "objective justification" in O.W. Heick, *History of Christian Thought*, Vol. II (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 217f.; likewise Francis Pieper's statements on this subject in *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. II, p. 508.

mann changed the emphasis from divine wrath to divine love. "Christ's work", he said, "is not the forensic production of the condition for grace but rather the *historical* realization of the divine will of grace itself."²² Since Adam's fall, the wrath of God rested upon all his descendents. In the incarnation the Son of God entered the human race to carry out his own calling. His righteousness is this that he remained steadfast to the end in his calling (*Beruf*) which became to him the cause of suffering and death. His suffering was an evil (*Uebel*), not punishment. He never was the object of the Father's wrath, not even vicariously. Through his steadfastness Jesus atoned (*suehnte*) the sin of Adamic humanity. In this way satisfaction was rendered to God by God himself. According to Hofmann, God is both subject and object of the atonement.²³ Forde is right when he says that for Hofmann Christ did battle and suffered in man's place (*an unserer Statt*), but he did not suffer the divine punishment for sin instead of us (*anstatt uns*). This subtle distinction is essential. "It was not so much the term vicarious satisfaction that he rejected (if it had been properly understood); rather it was the *structure* of the theology which lay behind the term that he wanted to destroy."²⁴ Reconciliation was made not *through* Christ but rather *in* Christ in whom fellowship was restored between God and man. Jesus was the Second Adam, the beginner of a new humanity. With him a new epoch of *Heilsgeschichte* has begun.

Hofmann's teaching of the atonement marks a turning point in the history of Lutheran theology. It is an act of restitution of the *Christus Victor* motif as found in the patristic age and Luther.²⁵ Hofmann was the first one who distinguished between Luther's theology and Lutheran orthodoxy. On the other hand, by his emphasis on divine love he gave impetus to the Neo-Protestant view of God as the dear God (*der liebe Gott*) without wrath (Ritschl and his followers).

ESCHATOLOGY

In keeping with his concept of revelation as *Heilsgeschichte*, Hofmann developed a marked interest in the unfolding of the eschatological drama. Eschatology became an integral part of his system. In this respect he anticipated Albert Schweitzer by nearly a century. But, unlike Schweitzer, he regarded the eschatology of the New Testament as normative for the contemporary believer. Nor did he, like Karl Barth, conceive eschatology to be a mere epistemological principle of theology. Instead, he like Cullman in *Christ and Time*, held to a linear chronological succession of Redemptive History.

Hofmann's view of the Kingdom is supernatural throughout. The Kingdom will come not by evolution as held by the religious activists; rather it will come by divine intervention. In the end-time the glory of God will be revealed in time and history. He rejected the continuous historical interpretation of Revelation of Luther and the

22. Quoted from Forde, p. 39. Italics added.

23. *Schutzschriften fuer eine neue Weise alte Wahrheit zu lehren*, Vol. II (1857); quoted in R.H. Gruetzmacher, *Textbuch zur systematischen Theologie*, 1923. pp. 100 f.

24. Forde, p. 67.

25. G. Aulen, *Christus Victor*.

older dogmaticians. He discarded the traditional view of the Pope as Antichrist which, we ought to remind ourselves, never had the importance of a dogma, for Luther and in the Confessions, for they also viewed Islam as a manifestation of the Antichrist.²⁶ Hofmann also rejected the view of the millenium as a period in the past history of the church. He held that Antiochus Epiphanes, "the enemy of the Old Testament people of God" will be revealed again at the end of time. Commenting on the number 666 (Rev. 13:18) he said, "The Greek language, which is the most beautiful flower of the natural development of the human race, will remain till the end of time. As the Jewish people will remain as the place of the final materialization of the divine economy, so the Greek language will survive to be the tongue of the last enemy of God. This will be the final conflict between the *Hellenes* and *Ioudaioi*."²⁷ In the millenium, he said, the reign of Satan will be ended and for a thousand years sinful humanity will be subject to the beneficial reign of the glorified church of Christ.

His views were shared by his colleague in the theological faculty, Reinhold Frank who held, "Christ, returning in glory, will exercise a visible reign on earth." "Israel will return to Palestine and God will restore the Kingdom to Judah."²⁸ Rejecting this gross view of the millennial reign of Christ, the late bishop H.L. Martensen of Copenhagen, like Spener²⁹ held to a more spiritual concept of chiliasm. "There must be some climax the human race and the church may attain to, even within these earthly conditions, a period which shall present the highest blossoming and flowering of history."³⁰ This view had considerable vogue among pastors of the old independent Synod of Iowa. Since the Missouri Synod continued to hold fast to the interpretation of the dogmaticians of the seventeenth century, chiliasm was bound to become a matter of controversy between the two synods. The article on the Millenium in the *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* (Vol. II, 1561-63) supports, by and large, the position of the former Iowa Synod. Written by Kurt Hutten at Stuttgart, Germany, the author may have been influenced by Swabian pietism which owes much to forbears such as J.A. Bengel, died 1752³¹ and to F.C. Oetinger, died 1782.³²

In the last century millenianism was also eloquently defended at the Swabian university of Tuebingen by Tobias Beck and by his pupil K.A. Auberlen at nearby Basel. Beck, in turn, exerted a profound influence on Finnish pietism which may have contributed to T.A. Kantonen's defence of millenianism in his Knubel-Miller Lectures, 1954, *The Christian Hope*.

Independent of pietism, Hanns Lilje, too defended chiliasm, saying that "God's will in creation and redemption reaches its goal *within* history . . . believers will share in the life and reign of Christ *in* the world."³³ Lilje's acceptance of chiliasm is

26. See the original version of Luther's hymn, "Lord, keep us steadfast in thy word and curb the murderous Pope and Turk".

27. *Der Schriftbeweis*, 2nd ed. (1857 ff), II, 2703.

28. Quoted by Paul Althaus, *Die letzten Dinge*. 4th edition, 1933, pp. 294 f.

29. *Pia Desideria*, translated by T.G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964).

30. *Christian Dogmatics*. Engl. edition (1860), p. 470.

31. Vol. I, pp. 205 f.

32. *Ibid.* Vol. III, 1791.

33. *The Last Book of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955), p. 251.

amazing for Paul Althaus has convincingly shown that divine glory and history are opposites. It is by faith only that the Gospel of Jesus can be discerned as divine truth. The Kingdom of Glory lies beyond history. There is no room for a transitional stage.³⁴

In conclusion, Hofmann's particular eschatological views on the whole find little support in contemporary Lutheran theology. Oscar Cullmann, however, referring to Hofmann as a "brilliant representative" of *Heilsgeschichte*³⁵ shares Hofmann's view of history as an unfolding of the Christ-event. His concept of the Rule of Christ reads like a modern version of Augustine's view of the millenium in the *City of God*. Redemptive history has already entered the world process, he says, "without, however, being as yet identical with it."³⁶ Though the state is not divine, it "too belongs within the Lordship of Christ."³⁷ History is indeed the locus of the redemptive work of God. In the Incarnation he entered history of which the Scriptures are the only reliable source.

34. Althaus, pp. 303 ff.

35. *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 184.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 198. See Karl Barth's practically identical views in *Church and State* (London: SCM Press, 1939.)

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