

[1974. Review of The Challenge of Our Age, by Hendrik Hart. Blue Banner Faith and Life (Oct.-Dec). Reproduced by Permission of Crown and Covenant Publications]

THE CHALLENGE OF OUR AGE, by Hendrik Hart. The Association for the Advancement of Christian Studies, Toronto; 1968, xii + 147 pp., paperback.

This paperback brings forcibly to our attention the serious threats of secularism against Christianity today. Its clear exposition of Harvey Cox's **The Secular City** is profoundly disturbing. Such threat and dangers need emphasis. Too few Christians see how extensively and powerfully anti-Christian philosophy, politics, and morality (or immorality) have permeated our nation. The author is to be commended for trying to raise Christians from their semi-ignorance or frustrated lethargy; but one wonders whether his recommendations are as perceptive as his warnings.

The reader must then ask: Is Dr. Hart's diagnosis as correct in detail as it is in general? Are his explicit recommendation the proper Biblical prescriptions? And a sub-question would be, Are his recommendations clear or ambiguous?

As to this last question, **The Provisional Outline of Responsibilities, with Specific Areas, and Positive Mandate** (pp. 74-79), are hardly informative. The only specific item is a 1966 report to the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church. From the very little he says, I should guess (and it is only a guess) that the Spirit of God forty years ago forbade going to the movies, but now in the present situation the Spirit of God has given permission (because the movies are so much more moral now?).

Some of the author's language is ambiguous. For example, "The central appeal to which we must be open at all times is that any critical review of our traditions and any prophetic view of our future contributions is spiritually opposed and contrary to any and every secular and pagan achievement" (p. 71). The more carefully one reads this sentence, the less intelligible it appears. The danger is that the reader will discount the threat of secularism because of such uninformative, useless, and meaningless language. There needs to be what the author calls "concretization." But this is what his book in general lacks; and the few instances he supplies (his evasion about lying – p. 55 – and his disapproval of Victorian morality – pp. 69-70 –), cause a conservative Christian to raise his eyebrows.

Another example is: "It may never be supposed that the Spirit of God leads people of the twentieth century in a nineteenth century way" (p. 83). Never? Surely this sentence is too sweeping. Of course there are many differences between political conditions in the Roman Empire, the nineteenth century and America today. But did not Romans 1:27-32, which presumably applied to the pagans before Christ, apply also the nineteenth century; and does it not apply to homosexuality in the large denominations today?

There are some technical errors. He classifies Emerson as a Pragmatist. No secular, professional philosopher would do so. For all Emerson's incompetence in philosophy, he was sort of Hegelian and transcendentalist. Astoundingly also, the author traces the background of Operationalism to Plato and gives no evidence that he has read Percy Bridgman.

But the Biblical Christian, if he is not a professional philosopher, will be more disturbed by Dr. Hart's view of the truth of the Bible.

First, as to truth. "Many Christians ... say that truth is objective and that it is independent of us. But this is a very dangerous thought, connected with the assertion that truth is fact-correspondence" (p. 56). Attached to this sentence is the following footnote (p. 62): "Theories of truth that speak of absolute objectivity make truth to be a conceptual matter of doubtful origin. Intellectualistic doctrines of truth cannot possibly account for the biblical notion of truth as something to be done and lived. Truth primarily concerns man's relation to the Word of God and not his first of all having correct ideas or beliefs." Then, too, the author's remarks on p. 118 seem to imply that truth is not propositional.

In opposition to this, the reviewer wishes to assert that all truth is propositional. The term dog or cat is not by itself true. Attach to either one the predicate black, and you have a proposition, which is true, or false, as the case may be. The name Moses is neither true nor false; but the proposition, "Moses wrote of me," is true. A command, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," is not itself true. Commands are not propositions and cannot be either true or false, as also for another example, "Right face!" But the proposition, God commands men not to commit adultery, is true. Nothing can be true unless it is a proposition. Hence when anyone speaks of non-propositional revelation, he is speaking of something unintelligible, uninformative, and so devoid of meaning that it cannot be false.

For this reason the final proposition of Dr. Hart's note on p. 62 is false. Truth first of all does indeed concern our having correct ideas or belief. The Playboy people do not obey the commandments because they do not believe that God commanded them. There cannot be obedience to divine authority unless one believe that there is such authority. Therefore, contrary to Dr. Hart's position, our relation to God's Word is first of all a correct intellectual understanding of what the Scripture teaches.

But if theories of truth and talk about propositions are too philosophical for the man in the pew, Dr. Hart's view of revelation, the Bible, and the Word of God ought to be matters of great concern.

First, for Dr. Hart the Bible is not the only divinely inspired revelation: "As such, as inscripturation, there is nothing unique about the Bible, for God's revelation is certainly not limited to that book. Nor is the inspiration of the Bible something limited to it alone. For we certainly do not believe that after the Bible was complete God stopped inspiring other authors." (p, 118-2 19). Note here that the inspiration of later authors is put on a level with the inspiration of the Bible, or vice versa, that the Bible is reduced to the level of Bavinck or Balzac. Nor does all the Bible seem to be the Word of God: "For example, in Genesis 3 we have only seven times a 'word' of God, twice a word of the serpent, twice of the woman, twice of the man, and then yet the connecting words of the writer" (p. 131, n. 13). Does not this mean that the words of the author of Genesis (and we wonder whether Dr. Hart admits the Mosaic authorship) are not the words of God? Since the words of Moses and Isaiah are somewhat extensive, we also wonder how much of the Bible could have come from God.

In view of this is it not surprising that Dr. Hart rejects some Scriptural teachings. There are two dangers in reading the Bible, he says. "The one is Biblicism, which is essentially idolatry, because it reduces the Word of God to Bible-text ... A Bible thus read will finally have nothing to say to us anymore apart from ... so-called rules for faith and morals out of touch with

contemporary life.” (p. 120). “The Word of God gives us ‘principles’ by which to live. It is our responsibility to ‘concretize’ these principles. In Israel this concretization was done by God himself ... In Christ the Mosaic law has been fulfilled and we have not again the responsibility to give our own concrete expression to the principle of the law.” (p. 81, n. 13).

If propositions mean anything, these sentences quoted say that Moses or God himself concretized the principles of the Word of God for the ancient Israelites. But this concretization does not apply to today. We must again and now make a different concrete expression of the principle of the law. “Thou shalt not commit adultery” was Moses’ rule for faith and morals. That was his concretization of the Word of God. Our situation needs a different one.

So says Dr. Hart. But devout Christians, who believe that the propositions of the Bible are true, do not say so.

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