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The Secularization of History

An Introduction to the Theology of Friedrich Gogarten

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34 "Though there were recorded human actions ~~wh~~ whose echo has come down to us in codes, chronicles, inscriptions, and artifacts, Gogarten thinks that the man of pre-Christian times, with the exception of the Jews and, to a limited extent, of the Greeks, did not experience the world historically, since to ~~ex~~perience the world as history demands two attitudes which parallel the double dimension of personality. First, we can only speak of man's existing historically when he is consciously ~~res~~ponsible for his own destiny and that of the world, and where he therefore regards ~~the~~^{this} sphere of ordinary human being and action as fully real. Secondly, man only exists historically when his responsibility for ~~the~~ world occurs in the context of a quest for the unity ~~of~~ or meaning of history, a quest without which responsibility is either stultified by the ~~accep~~tance of a prematurely final meaning or dissolved into the ritualism of mythical or technological process.

35 .. keep in mind his two definitions of secularization: on the one hand it means the transformation of the relation between man and the world ~~ff~~ from a mythical unity to the cosmos ^rto responsibility for the world; on the other hand it means the separation of ~~ix~~ originally Christian ideas and experiences from their divine ground and their transformation into purely human phenomena....

35 This secondary secularization by which man's independence is divorced from his acknowledgement of the divine mystery is, of course, what is often meant by the term, secularization, today.

35 Gogarten grants that it ~~is~~ took this secondary, anticlerically motivated secularization to actually make effective the desacralization of the world originally achieved by Christian faith.

37 In effect the medieval church transformed Christian faith into a world view that it hoped would provide the basis for a stable order, but the price paid for this magnificent achievement was to turn the mystical body /38/ into an encompassing power similar to the pre-Christian cosmos.

38 For by denying the church's claim to sovereignty over the world, Luther turned the entire exterior aspect of man's life over to the dominion of human reason.

38n For Paul the gospel finally puts an end to the Jewish legal piety and its particular demands. But for ~~the~~ Luther the law in which he had sought ~~the~~ his salvation was in fact the gospel, but understood as law by the church and used by him as law to fully justify himself. Therefore Luther did not battle /39/ against the law as such but against the ~~the~~ opinio, man's intention to make ~~the~~ himself just before God by fulfilling the law.

39 The real failure of the church, as Gogarten sees it, was... to have headed in the opposite direction until it transformed Christian faith ~~into a mere historical fact~~ which a mode of existence in mature sonship into Christianity, a supposedly revealed world view.

46-48 Three criticisms of Gogarten

48 Although it is hard to accept as historically accurate Gogarten's contention that Christian faith stands in a causal relationship to secularization, his theological argument that faith is not only compatible with secularization but ~~the~~ demands its continuance remains intact. If he is right theologically, then the effort to turn secularization back and escape the radical implications of the historicizing of human ~~existence~~ existence would be a movement against faith itself. Such an attempt would in effect surrender the freedom of faith for the servitude of an outmoded world view. The fundamental implication of Gogarten's position, therefore, is that secularization is a one-way street.

48 Since the desacralization of the cosmos by faith also meant /49/ that the man of faith henceforth experienced the world as history, Gogarten's opening gambit in the dialogue with subjectivism is to discover where the imprint of the question of faith in God is to be found in man's experience of ~~the~~ the historicity of his existence. The most far-reaching effect ~~of~~ of Christian faith on human life - embracing both believer and unbeliever - is the ~~historical~~ historicizing of human existence which has accompanied secularization.

50 It is a commonplace not only of contemporary theology but of most of the Jewish-Christian tradition that God cannot be an object we represent to ourselves and certify as real without his ceasing to be God for us.

51 Since self-grounded freedom and autonomy are the unquestioned presuppositions of modernity, theology will serve the Christian community by reminding it that God deals with man precisely in this experience of freedom and autonomy and not in some kind of religious or supernatural realm.

54 Thus the sway of subjectivism excludes anything like genuine /55/ mystery, i. e., a question whose answer involves the being of the one who questions. Genuine mystery in Gogarten's definition is a power before which man's thought recoils in the awareness that his thought and existence already "belong" to it. Gogarten believes that if man is to remain human, he must perceive the question of his humanity as a question ~~to~~ⁱⁿ which he always stands and from which he can never escape.

55 When we inquire into the being of man we come finally not only to the point where we do not yet know anything, but to a point where we can in principle know nothing through the mode of objectifying thought.

57 To become aware that his humanity is not simply given but something to be decided, is to let himself be sensitized for the ~~my~~ mystery of ~~being~~ his being in the world.

57 Gogarten considers two elements essential if man is to ex^perience the world historically: first, he must be responsible for himself and the order of the world and, second, he must never resolve or abandon the question of the meaning of history as a whole.

58 .. man himself, and not just his functions, is the subject of history.

59 No matter how ingenious or energetic the philosopher, he can never arrive at the meaning of history by adding up the results of research, since he would have to wait until history were at an end.

59 Historical research has ~~x~~ been able to go on its way relatively undisturbed, [without a certain context of meaning,] but the synthetic philosophy of history has been rendered almost impossible by the fact that all systems of meaning, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ including Christianity, are ~~xxxxxxxx~~ recognized as historical and thus not valid for the whole of history.

62 Does this emphasis on actual relationships not eliminate the past as genuine history? On the contrary, Gogarten contends that the emphasis on encounter lets the past be genuinely past, since his understanding of historical reality does ~~not~~ not dissolve the otherness of the past in an explanation or interpretation. "For only when a Thou meets me in something past and when I am thus called by this past to a decision, can this past be history. The genuine dialectic of history from a theological point of view, therefore, is not between history and superhistory or /63/ even between the relative and the absolute, but the completely temporal dia~~x~~lectic within his~~t~~ory between part and present, visible and invisible.

63 Gogarten draws two further conclusions from this interpersonal understanding of histor~~x~~ical reality. First, not every event in the past is history, i. e. has the power to be present historically, but only those events which encounter us as a past thou and call for a decision. This applies of course not only to individual persons but also to communities such as Israel. Se~~m~~cond, and more important, we do not choose what events of the past and present will be history for us, but the events themsleves lay claim on us through present witnesses to the tradition which these events have sustained

63 Gogarten's purpose... was to show how "Jesus himself /64/ can be present in his own historical reality and not just an explanation."

64 .. the church's announcement of God's coming to us in Jesus is not only a reference to something historical but actually creates history.

64 When this perspective is applied to the past, it means that the prime question of history for man is not the reliability of a reported sequence of~~x~~ happenings but the claim of certain men and events of the past to be the dialogical partners of my present existence. /65/ The second thing which emerges... this means that the question of God becomes urgent where the question of my humanity is at stake in my encounter with other men.

65 Thus, in his later work, Gogarten finds in responsibility the "constitutive elementX of history" since there can only be what we call history where the "worldno longer encompasses man, but where man has taken over responsibility for it."

//66 The point at which the biblical narrative is most unlike the historical constructions of the modern period is not so much the factor of supernatural intervention as the density or mysterious depth of the biblical story.

66 .. the biblical saga is never well rounded but always filled with "paratactic gaps." In this absence of a surface coherence and completeness the biblical narrative is closer to the realism of those modern novelists who refuse the standpoint of omniscience.

67 By the "density" of ~~the~~ biblical history Gogarten means its eschatological character, its occurring out of an impenetrable and undeterminable future. This understanding of historical reality runs counter to the modern concept of history as a series of self-explanatory and enclosed units created out of the past, since the concept of historical reality which corresponds to this view of the past treats the future as something to be mastered and anticipated on the ~~xxx~~ basis of past and present.

76 Of course the "power" or "mystery" ~~of history~~ Gogarten intends here is not a special object of experience, nor is it particularly connected with a sense of the sacred. On the contrary, it is the power of the question of man when that question reaches the intensity of demanding an answer which man can only give with himself. Thus God is not a being which uses the oncoming and impenetrable future; he is himself that which comes. But we must remember that the future which Gogarten means here is the absolute future which throws man back upon his naked selfhood. If a man does ~~not~~ succumb in resignation ~~and~~ or despair, nor flee into the security of an ideology or the amnesia of hectic activity, then he must answer its interrogation with himself. It is precisely here where man is strongest, where his being the creator and preserver of himself and the world is at stake, that he stands ~~under~~ under the pressure of the question of God.

78 Therefore only when the church ceases to treat the claim of the crucified and risen Jesus as a religious message and begins to see that it concerns the being of man before the future will its preaching become authentic.

79 Far from dissolving the past into the present, Gogarten would argue that treating the past as a ~~is~~ living claim on the present is the only way to let it have its own integrity since an explanation in terms of causal interconnections objectifies the past in such a way as to deaden its power to elicit our response.

81 In other words, God is not identical with the future but with the unfathomable mystery of the future. The same thing could be said of such phenomena as fidelity, trust, love. The advantage of the concept of the future over these is that it can embrace not only the dimension of mystery in interpersonal relations but also what comes to man from all of history and from nature as well.

85 If we are not misled by the absentminded recitation of formulas in the churches, it is no exaggeration to say that for increasing numbers of men the name Jesus is an empty form.

85 For Gogarten the divinity of Jesus Christ is precisely his historicity.

85 It has become a commonplace of contemporary theology that ~~re~~velation is not the ~~imp~~arting of information about God, but in some sense God's imparting of himself. Gogarten also finds the particularity of the biblical revelation in the relation of God to man, and he defines revelation as God's "being with man."

86 It is in the humanity of Jesus that God reveals himself and this humanity is the "sole starting point for our thought about him.

~~A~~ ... person does not mean inner life or individuality but the being of man in his relation to other men and to the divine mystery.

90 The specific concreteness Gogarten is seeking with regard to the history of Jesus concerns Jesus' relation to God and to the world as a whole. Because this relation actually takes place in Jesus' responsibility or faith, it is ~~is~~ at once too ordinary and too subtle for the usual categories of historical research.... To object that it is not historical because the being of God is involved is to miss the fact that the kingdom of God which Jesus proclaims has its place in the midst of the world.

111 But we must ask how replacing the notion of two "natures" with that of two "histories" or two "relations" affects the understanding of the difference between Jesus and other men. The difference is obviously not in some ~~px~~ special power or endowment of Jesus which makes him in some sense more than a man. Rather, whereas we have perverted our responsibility as sons, Jesus has "fulfilled" it; whereas we have forfeited our genuine historicity, his life remains fully historical because he exposes himself to the impenetrable future without reservation.

112 We may summarize the basic ^ustructure of Gogarten's Christology by saying that there is only one history of Jesus, although that history has two/^{distinct}aspects. On the ~~x~~ person of Jesus both the life of God (the mystery out of which man and the world have their being) and the life of man (who stands on his own as the responsible son) are fully present yet distinct. The unity of these two aspects in Jesus' responsibility is the history ~~xxx~~ toward which faith is directed. Here we have Gogarten's way of honoring the christological task of expressing the unity of God and man in Jesus Christ in such a way that both God and man are present in their integrity. Of course he has not solved the problem of Christology thereby, since his sole concern is to point to the mystery in historical-personal rather than metaphysical terms. And there is no doubt that his personalistic categories are less ~~xxx~~ palpable than those of the metaphysical tradition, but so is the language of the New Testament. It is to the dense and, to that extent, ambiguous metaphor of Scripture that he appeals, especially in Johannine piety:

Fatherhood and sonship... in their unity are the single element, filled with the divine Majestasm in which Jesus lives here ~~x~~ on earth. And he lives in this element as the one sent by the Father to the world, in order to take his own... into it so that they like him may have life in it.

113 But by refusing to speak of the divinity of Christ except in terms of the relation between the man Jesus and God, Gogarten leaves himself open to the charge of having repeated the liberal type of Christology in existentialist and personalistic garb.

115 Thus Gogarten believes Hermann^r actually applied an ideal (the "good") to the man Jesus and failed to let his concrete history come to expression, since he made the "content"^c of faith an idea outside of history. Gogarten's effort is actually to go further than Herrmann and to treat both the Christ and Jesus historically.

116 Since revelation cannot be information nor point to a supernatural world beyond our own, the revelation of the impenetrable future as grace can only mean our participation in Jesus' mode of being. At the end of life in this world we may open ourselves in ~~trust~~ trust to the impenetrable future of death, but we are indeed trusting into the unknown. This is no doubt the price that must be paid by a historical theology that will let go of all metaphysical securities. It pictures the Christian existence as courage, but as a courage of hope and not of assurance. For it must look upon the preoccupation with "assurance" as no more than a flight from maturity fostered by a pre-Christian notion of the divine as a providential cosmic power

116//the traditional expiatory notion of sacrifice is excluded since a sacrifice is essentially a cosmic act linking the natural and supernatural.