

Protestantism and Progress

by Theodore Plantinga

I

What would you say if someone called you a "post-Enlightenment" Christian? Would you be upset? It happened to me once, but no insult was intended. A colleague of mine declared that a whole group of us gathered in a room with him were "post-Enlightenment" Christians.

Words that begin with "post-" are difficult to assess. It is sometimes said that we live in a "post-Christian" era, and in a certain sense this is true. Yet this does not mean that people today cannot be genuine Christians. The phrase "post-Enlightenment," however, has a slightly different meaning. It suggests that the Enlightenment is a "fait accompli," a set of historical changes that cannot be reversed. Just as the Republicans did not try to undo Roosevelt's New Deal when they came to power in 1952, Christians seem to have given up fighting the influence of the Enlightenment. An Enlightenment-oriented conception of man and freedom simply seems to be presupposed in our social and political discussions.

If we are "post-Enlightenment" Christians, it is because we have made our peace with the Enlightenment. Perhaps one reason why many Christians in North America and Europe feel such antipathy to the Afrikaner Calvinists in South Africa is that the latter are not "post-Enlightenment" Christians. In a real historical sense, the Afrikaners settled in their current homeland *before* the Enlightenment and missed out on it. As a result they have trouble understanding the preoccupation with freedom and equality among many North American and European Calvinists who fit into the category of "post-Enlightenment" Christians.

II

What do we mean by the "Enlightenment"? Some historians are suspicious of such labels, but as a philosopher I would have a hard time getting along without them. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who may well be the most important philosopher of them all, also believed in labels. In an influential little essay entitled "What Is Enlightenment?" he tells us that the motto of the Enlightenment is "Have the courage to use your own intelligence!" This is

precisely what a great many people are apparently unwilling to do. Kant observes: "Through laziness and cowardice a large part of mankind, even after nature has freed them from alien guidance, remain immature. It is because of laziness and cowardice that it is so easy for others to usurp the role of guardians. It is so comfortable to be minor! If I have a book which provides meaning for me, a pastor who has conscience for me, a doctor who will judge my diet for me and so on, then I do not need to exert myself. I do not have any need to think; if I can pay, others will take over the tedious job for me."

Especially significant here is the new view of authority that emerges. The individual is called to be his own authority, for *all* men possess reason and intelligence. What we must do is to encourage people to think for themselves instead of basing their decisions and beliefs on what others tell them. Anything and everything can now be brought before the bar of reason for critical examination. This is the spirit of Kant's own philosophy, and it is also the spirit of the Enlightenment as a whole.

No longer can the traditional authorities be viewed with a superstitious reverence. Hans Kung observes that the Enlightenment "demythologized authority." On the modern understanding of authority, he writes, "... no truth is accepted without being submitted to the judgment of reason, merely on the authority of the Bible or tradition or the Church, but only after a critical scrutiny."

What is meant by such talk is not all that remote from daily experience. Should a small child obey his mother's command simply because she is his mother? Or should he "have the courage to use his own intelligence"? A "post-Enlightenment" child who was given a command would demand an explanation -- in short, the reason why. If his mother could convince him that what she wanted him to do (or refrain from doing) was indeed sensible and wise, he would comply.

III

We now tend to think along Enlightenment lines when we talk about progress in history. Societies are "modern" if they have absorbed the Enlightenment legacy of freedom, rationality and equality. A primitive society or a society in need of "modernization" is simply one in which such ideals have not been realized to any great extent.

If Protestants are to be proponents of progress, it appears that they must then identify themselves with Enlightenment ideals. Not all Protestant thinkers have done so, however. The Dutch Calvinist historian Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-76) looked at the Enlightenment spirit, which culminated in the chilling events of the French Revolution and its reign of terror, as an unsettling force that was bringing disorder into society. He laid out his conception of the religious spirit driving European history in his most important book, entitled *Ongeloof en revolutie* (Unbelief and Revolution).

Groen was certainly in favor of progress in history, but he did not believe genuine progress would be achieved by adopting the ideals of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The freedom offered in the name of those ideals would turn out to be tyranny, he was convinced. Therefore, when he established a Christian political movement in the Netherlands, he called it the " *Anti-Revolutionary Party*." Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), his successor as head of this group, was of the same conviction and argued that genuine progress in history and genuine freedom can best be secured on the basis of a Calvinistic conception of life.

It should be noted here that one can speak of the Enlightenment in a narrow sense and a broad sense. In the narrow sense it is no more than a period within European history -- a period that had its day and then was gone. In the broader sense the Enlightenment represents the crystallization of Humanistic social and political ideals that had been building for a long, long time. In other words, it is a major restatement of modern man's secular alternative to Christianity as a way of life. The Enlightenment in the broad sense was not overcome or repudiated in such nineteenth-century thinkers as Hegel and Marx but was carried along in a transformed version. Today we see Enlightenment ideals shining through in the thinking of the neo-Marxists, such as Juergen Habermas (born 1929). The contemporary preoccupation with liberation of every sort, which manifests itself in part as opposition to discrimination (both real and imagined), cannot be understood apart from the Enlightenment and its characteristic emphases.

IV

Protestantism likes to think of itself as having contributed substantially to the progress that has been made in the modern world. But what, exactly, is its contribution? The German theologian and historian Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) reflected on this question in his thought-provoking book *Protestantism and Progress*.

Protestants who love the Enlightenment and look to its ideals as the source and guarantee of progress like to depict the Reformation as a step toward the Enlightenment. In the Enlightenment we find a disdain for institutions and a glorification of the individual. Now then, wasn't Luther the one who got all of this started? Didn't Luther rebel against the establishment? Wasn't he therefore the first modern man? And isn't Protestantism the ultimate root of the ideals of freedom and equality in the modern world?

Troeltsch sees no support for such an interpretation of Protestantism. What we call modernity does not begin with the Reformation: "... Protestantism cannot be supposed to have directly paved the way for the modern world." Because of Protestantism, "... Europe had to experience two centuries more of the medieval spirit." Troeltsch informs us that "... it was only the great struggle for freedom at the end of the seventeenth and in the eighteenth century which really brought the Middle Ages to an end" (pp. 85, 86).

Who, then, was Martin Luther? Wasn't he an early battler for liberation? Not according to Troeltsch, for he argues: "Protestantism was at first concerned only with the answer to the old question about *assurance of salvation* ..." (p. 60). Protestantism has a great deal in common with Catholicism and the outlook of the Middle Ages. In fact, it can almost be viewed as an extension of the medieval outlook: "The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are no longer the Middle Ages, but neither are they 'Modern Times.' They are the 'Confessional' Age of European history ..." (p. 89). "The point of primary importance," Troeltsch informs us, "is that, historically and theologically regarded, Protestantism -- especially at the outset in Luther's reform of the Church -- was, in the first place, simply a modification of Catholicism, in which the Catholic formulation of the problems was retained, while a different answer was given to them" (p. 59).

What does Protestantism as described by Troeltsch have in common with today's Protestantism, which comes in so many forms and varieties? Not a great deal. Troeltsch makes a distinction between early Protestantism, which is the vision and outlook of Luther and Calvin, and modern Protestantism, which absorbs much of the thinking of the modern world into itself. "The genuine early Protestantism of Lutheranism and Calvinism is, as an organic whole, in spite of its anti-Catholic doctrine of salvation, entirely a Church civilisation like that of the Middle Ages. It claims to regulate State and society, science and education, law, commerce and industry, according to the supernatural standpoint of revelation" Modern Protestantism, on the other hand has recognized in principle "... the possibility of a plurality of different religious convictions and religious societies existing alongside one another. It has

further, in principle, recognized alongside itself a completely untrammelled secular life, which it no longer attempts to control, either directly or indirectly, through the agency of the State" (pp. 44-6).

The deep difference between early and modern Protestantism can be clearly seen in how they relate to other movements and currents of thought. Troeltsch writes: "... early Protestantism differentiates itself clearly from those historical movements which were proceeding alongside of it -- which modern Protestantism has more or less completely taken up into itself, but which were inwardly deeply distinguished from it and had an independent influence of their own in history. Such are the humanistic, historical, philological, and philosophical theology, the sectarian Anabaptist movement with its assertion of the Church's independence of the State, and the wholly individualistic, subjectivistic Spiritualism. Early Protestantism distinguished itself from all these sharply and with cruel violence; and it did so, not merely from short-sighted bitterness or theological dogmatism, nor from opportunism or from the narrow sympathies of a period of decline. In all its leaders, in a Luther, a Zwingli, a Calvin, from the beginning, it was conscious of an inherent and essential opposition to them" (pp. 48-9).

Troeltsch finally sums up the deep gulf between early and modern Protestantism by means of a telling comment that shows us how much our world has changed since the days of Luther and Calvin. He observes: "Everywhere the idea of faith has triumphed over the content of faith ..." (p. 199). For a great many Protestants today it doesn't matter what it is that you believe -- as long as there is room for religion in your life.

V

By this point you may be wondering whether Troeltsch would classify you as an early or a modern Protestant. Perhaps you don't feel entirely at home in either camp. I know I don't, and therefore I do not mean to suggest that we must simply choose the one or the other. What strikes me instead as significant is how fully twentieth-century Protestantism as delineated by Troeltsch has identified itself with the modern world and its vision of progress, freedom and equality. Troeltsch, it appears, was familiar with the phenomenon of the "post-Enlightenment" Christian.

The historian Crane Brinton has written: "The main theme of Western intellectual and moral history since about 1700 has been the *coexistence and mutual interpenetration* of two very different broad world views, the Christian

and that of the Enlightenment." If this assessment is correct -- and I believe it is -- a continuing choice faces us as Protestants. Are we to become "modern Protestants" in Troeltsch's sense, absorbing into our theology and institutions ideas and patterns that Luther and Calvin would have regarded as alien? Or are we to try to disentangle Christianity from the Humanistic outlook of the Enlightenment? The latter, it seems to me.

But this is not to say that we must remain standing exactly where Luther and Calvin stood. The Reformation they inaugurated must be carried further -- especially in such areas as philosophy and political theory. Luther and Calvin did not solve the problem of the relation between church and state. There was work left for later generations of Protestants -- and there is still much work awaiting our generation. Let's see to it that we undertake this work in the spirit of "early Protestantism," that is, the spirit of the Reformation with its allegiance to the Bible as the Word of God.

VI

Now, I would not write all of this if I did not believe that we are in danger of undertaking our work in a different spirit instead. Protestants are human beings, and all human beings have a tendency to conform, to be like the others. A boy in school wants to wear the same kind of clothes as the other boys. People repeat the opinions they hear voiced around them -- and thereby public opinion swells. We all tend to say, "Me too!"

What I worry about in connection with twentieth-century Protestantism -- or Calvinism, to make it more specific -- is that we are all too quick to say, "Me too!" We are eager to be seen as favoring progress and justice and other such worthy aims. As a result, we find ourselves enlisting in crusades and jumping onto bandwagons. What is the concern of the hour? Some multinational corporation that needs to be boycotted? Some right-wing regime that is holding political prisoners? Some potential ecological disaster waiting for a small accident to trigger it? Since we wouldn't want anyone to conclude that we think along sixteenth-century lines, we get right into the forefront of these battles. After all, we're in favor of progress! Me too!

Sometimes such an attitude even has the effect of trivializing and hiding the gospel. Instead of calling an unbelieving world to repentance and conversion to Jesus Christ, the source of true life, we tell a lost world that small is beautiful, or that the native peoples of North America have been mistreated, or that many executives in the business world are male chauvinists. We place ourselves on

the side of right-thinking men (and women) of good will. As Protestants we want to be in the forefront of the struggle for progress.

When we take such an approach, we may win popularity and acceptance into the "right" circles, but we are selling the gospel and the Reformed faith short. Protestantism does indeed lead to progress in history -- but not the "me too" Protestantism that tags along behind secular Humanism with its short-sighted analysis of the human predicament. Sure progress is possible only for those who side with the King whose Kingdom is being established here on earth. Only that which is built in His name will abide. Calvin and Luther knew this. Hence we must build further on *their* foundation -- and not on the foundation of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. **[END]**