

4-1-1944

Harnack's Theological Positions

W. Arndt

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Arndt, W. (1944) "Harnack's Theological Positions," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 15 , Article 20.
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol15/iss1/20>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

The Christian layman, the simple peasant, has the right of private judgment.—And “he is doing an accursed thing who impairs this right by a hair's breadth.” Is such strong language called for? Let us see. (To be continued) TH. ENGELDER

Harnack's Theological Positions

The inclusion of Adolf Harnack in this series of articles on epoch-making modern theological leaders who promoted error requires an explanation. Strictly speaking, he was not the founder of a school of theology. He did not teach a system of doctrine of his own. In him we are dealing with a church historian, and not with a dogmatician. Still, when the persons to be treated in this series were listed, it was felt that Harnack's name would have to be included because in the period extending from about 1895 to 1920 he was the most frequently mentioned theologian of Germany, probably of the whole world, and exerted a vast influence in Europe and America.

I

Adolf (v.) Harnack was born 1851 in Dorpat in Livonia, where his father was theological professor at the time. Two years later the father was called to a chair of theology at Erlangen, which he occupied till 1866, when he returned to the University of Dorpat. Adolf, after absolving the theological course in the latter school, studied in Leipzig, where he earned his doctor's degree. His dissertation gave an indication of his chief interest; it dealt with the critical study of the sources pertaining to the history of Gnosticism. In Leipzig he began his teaching career as *professor extraordinarius* in 1876. In 1879 he was appointed to a regular professorship in Giessen, and in 1886 he was transferred to Marburg. Two years later he was called to the University of Berlin, where he served till his retirement in 1921. His death occurred June 10, 1930.

Harnack was the son of a staunch conservative Lutheran theologian, Theodosius Harnack (1817—1889), who was universally considered a pillar of orthodoxy. Besides other important books

wichtig zu sehen, dass in jeder christlichen Aussage, etwa in der eines Bauern, dass er lutherischer Christ sei, bereits ein theologisches Urteil enthalten ist, dass also im strengen Sinn *jeder Christ zugleich auch Theologe ist*” (*Theologia Militans*, XI, p. 13). Comment of CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, 1937, p. 743: “Da die Theologie ihrem eigentlichen Wesen nach nichts anderes tut, als die Aussagen der Schrift zu wiederholen, und die Schrift ein so einfaches, klares Buch ist, so muss man darauf gefasst sein, von dem gottesfuerchtigen, in der Schrift lebenden Bauern treffliche theologische Urteile zu hoeren.”

the father wrote a work which is highly praised in Lutheran circles and in 1927 was issued in a new edition, *Luthers Theologie*. When Adolf began to publish views that were negative and destructive with respect to the old Lutheran position, the father was deeply grieved. He wrote to his son, "If I had been more faithful, you would take a more positive stand than you actually do. I beg you in the name of everything that is dear and precious to you, my very dear Adolf, do not permit yourself to be influenced nor let your vanity be tickled by modern theology with its negative criticism, to which it does not make any difference whether it tears one page out of the Bible or rejects everything. Do not follow the consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) of the times, but that of the Church, for between these two we have to choose."¹⁾

The expostulations of the father were in vain; the son continued in the modernistic course, which he had come to regard as the right one, though he always spoke of his father with the highest respect.²⁾

1) Agnes v. Zahn-Harnack, *Adolf v. Harnack*, p. 106 f. The author is the daughter of Harnack, whose biography of her father, a learned work of 579 pages, appeared in 1936. One wonders to what extent the instruction Harnack had received in the days of childhood and youth were clung to by him in spite of negative views which he espoused. His daughter relates that when one of his children had been carried off by death, he often took his other children to the grave and there taught them the beautiful prayer of Valerius Herberger, which his own father had taught him at the grave of his (Adolf's) mother, who had died comparatively young:

Schreib meinen Nam'n aufs beste
 Ins Buch des Lebens ein;
 Und bind mein' Seel' fein feste
 Ins schoene Buendelein
 Der'r, die im Himmel gruenen
 Und vor dir leben frei;
 So will ich allzeit ruehmen,
 Dass dein Herz treue sel. — *Op. cit.*, p. 189.

One is reminded of the remark of Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, the famous Greek scholar, concerning Wellhausen, the negative Old Testament critic, that the latter every day spoke the old Lutheran table prayer "Komm, Herr Jcsu, sei unser Gast," etc. Cf. *Erinnerungen*, p. 189. How is this use of old orthodox prayers to be evaluated? Was it merely an adherence to forms that had become beloved through long acquaintance with them, or did it perhaps betoken a clinging of the heart to the Savior even though the profession of the mouth denied His teachings? Was it a case of happy inconsistency such as we meet quite frequently? Who can decide this question?

2) With sadness one reads of this apostasy, which, alas! had several famous parallels about the turn of the century. Bernhard Weiss, chief author for the various editions of Meyer's Commentary after the latter's death and still a fairly conservative theologian, had a son who was quite radical in his theological views, Johannes Weiss; Franz Delitzsch, in his youth a close friend of C. F. W. Walther, had a son, Friedrich, who as an advocate of Pan-Babylonianism held and sponsored positions that were entirely negative.

II

Harnack must have been a person of rarest intellectual gifts and attainments. Soon after he had begun to teach in Leipzig, his classroom became crowded; and this popularity of his continued to the very last. When in the winter of 1899—1900 he delivered his lectures, one a week and sixteen in number, on "What Is Christianity?" (*Das Wesen des Christentums*), the time selected was seven o'clock in the morning. We are told that the classroom was filled and that from 600 to 1,000 students, representing the various departments of the university, gathered about him at that forbidding hour. One of the students, so it is reported, who was an expert stenographer, took down accurately what the professor said and soon after the completion of the series presented him with a copy of his remarks.³⁾

The fame of Harnack soon spread to other countries, and highly flattering calls reached him. Among the institutions that desired to obtain his services was Harvard University, which twice invited him to join its faculty. This invitation was, of course, significant. It indicated definitely the brand of theology which he was known to teach. In the period immediately after the First World War the German Government offered Harnack the position of ambassador in Washington. Soon after he had come to Berlin, he was elected as a member of the Prussian Academy of Science, a much coveted distinction. When at the 200th anniversary the history of this academy had to be written, he was chosen for the task. In 1905 he was made head of the Royal Library. Later he was elected president of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society for the Promotion of the Sciences, which was founded to mark the centennial of the establishment of the University of Berlin. As early as 1881 he was made an editor of the influential *Theologische Literaturzeitung* and together with Schuerer conducted this journal till 1910.

Harnack was a man of astonishing industry, careful in research, willing to sacrifice hours in determining a little item of scholarship. Besides, he possessed high artistic gifts for putting his thoughts into proper and attractive form and the ability to produce with ease and rapidity. He wrote incessantly. In 1878, when he was only twenty-seven years old, the list of articles, brochures, and books written by him contained 90 titles.⁴⁾ Among the gifts presented to him at his seventy-fifth birthday was a carefully prepared bibliography of all his writings, which contained 1,500 items.⁵⁾

3) Cf. McCown, *The Search for the Real Jesus*, Charles Scribner's Sons, p. 229. McCown takes his information from the translator's preface (p. v) of Harnack's *What Is Christianity?* which will be referred to below.

4) Agnes v. Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

5) *Ibid.*, p. 525.

In reading of this man, his colossal labors, his eagerness to work and to spend himself in the service of scientific research and of what he considered the truth, one cannot help thinking of the athletes whose training Paul describes vividly and of whom he says 1 Cor. 9:25: "They do it to obtain a corruptible crown," and of the words of the Savior in Luke 16:8, "The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light."

III

As mentioned before, Harnack's field was church history, especially the history of dogma. The work that made him famous and will probably continue to be regarded his chief production was his *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, which appeared in three massive volumes 1886—1889. In 1909 its fourth edition was published. With special interest he investigated the history and literature of the first Christian centuries. Together with Gebhardt and Zahn he published a critical edition of the Apostolic Fathers and a number of volumes having the title *Texte und Untersuchungen*, which are extremely valuable on account of the source material they contain. His history of the literature of the early Christian Church (*Altchristliche Literaturgeschichte*), consisting of three volumes, is another monumental work of the highest significance for all New Testament scholars. In 1902 he published the celebrated book *Geschichte der Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, which is well known in English-speaking theological schools under the title *Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*. A work on the origin and development of church polity and ecclesiastical law during the first two centuries, produced in 1910, (*Entstehung und Entwicklung der Kirchenverfassung und des Kirchenrechts in den zwei ersten Jahrhunderten*) must be mentioned, too. Harnack's acquaintance with the early history of the Christian Church was so minute and thorough that (as Professor Goodspeed related in a lecture which I heard) when a certain old document had been discovered in which a proper name appeared and the discoverers were unable to identify the person named, Harnack at once supplied the information. His various writings on the Gnostic Marcion here come to mind. In addition to the above productions, his work that has to do with New Testament introduction and interpretation must be alluded to. Among other works he wrote the monographs entitled *Lukas der Arzt*, *Sprueche und Reden Jesu*, and *Die Apostelgeschichte*. An ardent adherent of the "two-source" hypothesis as to the origin of the Synoptic Gospels, he presented in *Sprueche und Reden Jesu* what he considered the content of the conjectural collection of sayings of Jesus which is referred to

by scholars as Logia or Q. In the works on Luke and Acts he vindicated the view that Luke, the companion of Paul, was the author of Acts. In fact, Harnack's writings after 1900 frequently had a conservative tinge and submitted proof that the old traditional view on this or that point was historically correct.

Before closing the chapter on Harnack's publications, a word must be said to characterize his *History of Dogma*. In it Harnack manifests his astounding acquaintance with the details of church history and of the sources and his ability to present the numerous facts and tendencies of the period in one harmonious and consistent whole. The power and brilliancy of the presentation are acknowledged by all critics. The work, however, is distinctly Modernistic. Besides other destructive features, it endeavors to show that the doctrines which we hold and confess in our Lutheran dogmatics are the result of a process of development and not taken from the Scriptures. He regarded the dogmas of the Christian Church in the second and third centuries as products of the Greek spirit which reacted in its own way to the preaching of the Gospel. Applying thus the idea of development to the history of Christian teachings, he placed himself in agreement with the prevailing notions of his day, which worshiped at the altar of evolution; and thus he destroyed, wherever his views were accepted, the belief that our doctrines are God-given and hence must remain inviolate.

IV

This observation may lead us to think of Harnack's theological views in general. To understand his positions, it should be said, in the first place, that he was, and desired to be, a disciple of A. Ritschl, whose works he had begun to study in Dorpat and whose personal acquaintance he made later on. In a review which he wrote in 1897 he stated, "The future of Protestantism as a religion and as a spiritual force lies in the direction which Ritschl has marked."⁶ In a letter addressed to Ritschl in 1886 he wrote, "I feel deeply that I must thank you for everything that I have learned and received from you and assure you of my abiding gratitude. As in the past, the firm consistency and power of your evangelical insight and the consciousness of not having taught in vain will be a shield to you against all attacks."⁷

What Harnack admired in Ritschl was, for one thing, the "freie Forschung" principle, that is, the view that the scholar should not be bound by any *a priori* considerations, such as the authority of the Bible or of the confessional writings, but should

6) *Reden und Aufsätze*, II², p. 355.

7) *Agnes v. Zahn-Harnack*, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

be permitted to investigate and to state his findings with full freedom. At this point Ritschl had totally parted company with confessional Lutheranism. That fidelity to the Scriptures and adherence to the Lutheran Confessions are for a faithful Lutheran not a yoke, but an obedience which his heart is eager to render, because he has found the Scriptures to be the Word of Life and the Lutheran Confessions a forceful expression of his own faith, Ritschl and Harnack did not acknowledge, because they did not believe the Scriptures in their fullness, nor did the Lutheran confessional writings voice their own deepest convictions.⁸⁾ There was, moreover, something in the method of Ritschl which appealed to young Harnack. The apparently minor questions which other dogmatists dwelt on at great length before they arrived at their chief themes were largely ignored, and without delay the student was introduced to the person of Jesus, forgiveness of sins, and the Christian congregation.⁹⁾

Next Harnack approved of Ritschl's attack on "speculative rationalism," which had come to occupy a big field in Protestant theology. Ritschl was opposed to metaphysics as a factor in theological thinking and definitions, and here he found in Harnack a willing disciple.¹⁰⁾ A related factor should be mentioned in this connection. Harnack admired Ritschl's earnest endeavor to gain a true understanding of God and of Christ through the study of history, especially the historical Jesus. With ecstasy he speaks of Ritschl's surrender of philosophy in favor of history ("der Verzicht auf die Philosophie zugunsten der Geschichte"). His own interests were so largely historical and connected with historical research that in this regard, too, Ritschl's attitude evoked his joyful assent.¹¹⁾

Again, Harnack was of one mind with Ritschl in the latter's polemics against pietism, that is, the unsound, morbid piety ("ungesunde Froemdigkeit") which parades as true Bible Christianity. He was willing to admit that Ritschl had been somewhat extreme in his opposition to "pietistic orthodoxy," but as to his essential position, he felt he could grant him his full support.¹²⁾

But he did not accept Ritschl's views in every respect. He says in the essay just referred to that his divergence from Ritschl consists in his different attitude toward the New Testament and his extension of the field belonging to the history of religion and

8) *Reden und Aufsätze*, vol. II², p. 367, where Ritschl's rejection of the "Inspirationsdogma" and of the "Unterwerfung des Dogmatikers unter jede Schriftlehre" are alluded to with approval.

9) *Ibid.*, p. 361.

11) *Ibid.*, p. 355.

10) *Ibid.*, p. 363.

12) *Ibid.*, p. 364.

hence of systematic theology.¹³⁾ In explanation it should be said that Ritschl had still spoken of the "reine biblische Offenbarungsglaube," which he maintained his system represented, while Harnack was of the opinion that such a pure Biblical faith based on revelation is untenable.¹⁴⁾ For Harnack, sad to say, the New Testament was not a collection of divine writings possessing unique authority. He was willing to say that they were historical documents of eminent worth, but hardly more. In other words, he believed that Ritschl in holding that the faith he taught was based on Biblical revelation had fallen into an inconsistency; for Ritschl, too, so Harnack avers, esteemed the Bible as a source for Christian doctrine merely on account of its "primary historical status."¹⁵⁾ As to the field of the history of religion, Ritschl had not been much interested in what pagan writers had said on matters of worship and religious belief, while Harnack held that all such utterances should be considered by those who desired to do justice to this field. Besides, he not only, as said before, did not share in its intensity Ritschl's aversion to pietism, but abandoned the latter's violent antagonism to Roman Catholic views as to the truly pious life.¹⁶⁾ As is evident from what has been said, Harnack departed still more radically from the old Lutheran faith, the faith taught in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, than Ritschl had done.

V

At various times the utter break on the part of Harnack with the old Christian faith became the subject of wide discussion. When he was called to Berlin, the Evangelische Oberkirchenrat, the ecclesiastical commission which formed the head of the Evangelical Church in Prussia, protested against his appointment. Harnack, so it was stated, had expressed doubts as to the apostolic origin of the fourth Gospel, 1 Peter, and Ephesians; he had denied the reliability of the Scripture accounts relative to miracles, especially those pertaining to the virgin birth of Christ, His resurrection, and His ascension; and he had denied that Christ Himself had instituted trinitarian Baptism. In spite of these charges, which were not declared untrue by Harnack, he was appointed — a sign how little the government authorities cared for true orthodoxy. All who had eyes to see could perceive that Harnack did not shrink from sponsoring very radical views of negative higher

13) *Ibid.*, p. 359.

14) *Ibid.*, p. 357.

15) "Sie alle" [that is, the followers of Ritschl] "schaetzen wie Ritschl die Bibel nur um ihrer geschichtlichen Urspruenglichkeit willen als Quelle fuer die christliche Glaubenslehre und wollen ihr die Autoritaet aus Offenbarung nicht zugestehen." *Ibid.*, p. 367.

16) *Ibid.*, p. 359.

criticism and abetted modern unbelief which still desired to pose as religious.¹⁷⁾

A few years later (1892) there came a controversy on the Apostles' Creed (*Streit um das Apostolikum*). Harnack publicly declared that he regarded belief in the resurrection of the body as conflicting with the teachings of Paul and that in his view acceptance of the teaching pertaining to the virgin birth of the Savior was something optional.¹⁸⁾ It became evident that Harnack with his eminent gifts was one of the most dangerous enemies Bible Christianity had to face.

The climax of Harnack's career, both as to his popularity in liberal circles and his antagonism to the old evangelical truth, was reached in the lectures mentioned above on "What Is Christianity?" In *Lehre und Wehre* (Vol. 47, 1901, pp. 321 ff. and 353 ff.) Dr. Pieper published a critique, and Dr. A. L. Graebner wrote an article for the *Theological Quarterly* having the very apt caption "What Is Christianity? Answered by One Who Does Not Know" (Vol. VI, 1902, pp. 95 ff.). The lectures lying before me in the translation of Thomas Bailey Saunders¹⁹⁾ are both popular and comprehensive in their exposition of Harnack's views on the nature of the Christian religion. The excitement which they created was due largely to the unusual circumstances of their delivery and the acclaim with which they were received by the classroom auditors. They are thoroughly naturalistic, giving expression to the positions which one arrives at when from the Gospel accounts of the life of Christ and from the Epistles everything that is miraculous is eliminated. In the third lecture Harnack submits what he considers the chief elements in the teaching of Jesus, "First, the kingdom of God and its coming; secondly, God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul; thirdly, the higher righteousness and the commandment of love."²⁰⁾ The reader sees that the doctrines of the deity of Christ and of His substitutionary atonement are not accorded a place in this summary. One can understand why a Jewish rabbi is reported to have said that Harnack's lectures did not answer the question What is Christianity? but, What is Judaism?²¹⁾ Albert Schweitzer, too, the famous New Testament scholar and missionary, was quite caustic in his criticism. He said that Harnack gave the Gospel such a form that he could without difficulty travel with it

17) Cf. Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 156—172.

18) *Ibid.*, pp. 193—214; Harnack, *Reden und Aufsätze*, I², pp. 219 to 298.

19) Published by G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901. Second edition, 1903.

20) Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* Translation by Saunders, p. 55.

21) *Hibbert Journal*, 1937, p. 399.

to A. D. 1899.²²⁾ Though Schweitzer is an arch-Modernist himself, Harnack's removal from his construction of Christ's vital message of everything that might be offensive to the thinking or the taste of sophisticated modern man aroused his dissension. Thus in this work Harnack stands before us as the exponent of Modernism *par excellence*, the prophet of easygoing liberal optimism, which basks in the sunshine of its own culture, solves neatly to its own satisfaction the problems of the universe, and has nothing but a shrug of the shoulders for such mysteries as still remain.

VI

To characterize Harnack's theological position further, it should be said that he definitely rejected the view which was quite popular in theological circles around 1900, that to obtain a correct understanding of religion one has to study one's own religious consciousness. He continued to insist that history, especially the history of Christ and of the Church, had to teach what true religion is.²³⁾ With equal definiteness he opposed the views of the school stressing the history of religion (Religionsgeschichtliche Schule), which endeavored to trace Christianity back to old heathen myths—an opposition which made some people say that Harnack had ceased to be a liberal.²⁴⁾

VII

While exhibiting an almost incredible activity in his chosen field, Harnack at the same time developed a deep interest in social work. He was responsive to everything he observed in the world about him. When in 1890 the Evangelical-Social Congress was formed in Germany, he rejoiced and became a member. In 1902 he was even made president of the organization—a position which he occupied till 1911.²⁵⁾ It is difficult to decide whether Harnack's activities in this field went beyond the sphere in which a theological professor may legitimately move. He seems to have been quite prominent in the debates on social questions that agitated Germany in the first decade of the century. Under his leadership the Evangelical-Social Congress condemned the refusal of mine owners in the Ruhr to submit their difficulties with employees to arbitration.²⁶⁾ On the other hand, he advocated the view that large possessions should serve the public good and was an ardent supporter of the inheritance tax principle.²⁷⁾

22) *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, II, p. 246.

23) Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

24) *Ibid.*, p. 297.

25) *Ibid.*, pp. 215 ff.; 371 ff.

26) *Ibid.*, p. 373.

27) *Ibid.*, p. 373.

VIII

When after the war the dialectical theology under the leadership of Barth, Brunner, Thurneysen, and Gogarten came to the fore, Harnack felt that a movement had begun whose language he did not understand. A new terminology was employed, strange ideas were presented, everything was foreign to a man like him. In 1920 when he heard Barth speak, his reaction was that the lecture contained not one sentence, not even one thought, in which he could join.²⁸⁾

In 1929 he wrote in a letter, "I never could have thought that a speculation might still arise among us for which I possess no antennae."²⁹⁾ Here one can sympathize with Harnack. Who of us has not felt that he was suddenly transported into a pathless wilderness abounding in grotesque, almost frightening rock formations when he began reading Barth's writings? But it was no longer Harnack, the brilliant historical scholar and man of the world, but the dialectical school which dominated the stage when he died.

In conclusion, if somebody had said to Harnack that he was a rationalist, he would, one imagines, have denied that the charge was justified and would have declared that he was not a rationalist but a historian. But one can easily see that Harnack did not write objective history, but permitted his judgments and evaluations to be colored by certain canons and considerations which had been suggested by human reason, such as: Miracles do not happen, Jesus was merely a man, everything miraculous must be eliminated from the Christian religion, the Bible is a human production. An appropriate closing sentence is the word of St. Paul, 1 Cor. 1:23, 24: "We preach Christ Crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block and unto the Greeks foolishness, but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

W. ARNDT

Circumcision and Baptism

The Bible does not speak very frequently on the meaning or the purpose of Holy Baptism and less frequently on the meaning and the purpose of Circumcision, and still less on the mutual relation of the two sacraments or on a comparison of Circumcision with Baptism. What little the Bible has to say on the points could be quoted in very short time. (Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1.)

But the question assigned for this paper seems to ask for more than just the quoting of those few Bible passages; for this is to

28) *Ibid.*, p. 532.

29) *Ibid.*, p. 534.