

NOTE

KARL BARTH AND FAITH: RECENT ORIENTATIONS

Although the *Church Dogmatics* is not altogether completed, the work of Karl Barth stands practically as an integral whole. In fact, the complementary work of assessment—analysis and critique—is already begun. In the presence of Barth's monumental opus, and also in the face of the serious attempts which have been made to interpret his thought, the purpose of this note is quite modest. It is twofold: (1) to schematize the orientations of critiques which deal with Barth, especially those that are Catholic; (2) to make certain suggestions concerning the primary position of the question of the nature of faith in this debate.

J. Hamer's judgment concerning the theology of Karl Barth¹ is, to all appearances, as devastating as the verdict Barth himself pronounces over the body of Schleiermacher's thought. For Hamer, the Swiss theologian is a proponent of theological occasionalism, which would, by keeping the wholly transcendent God in His heaven, also effectively deny Him the right and possibility of really working in His own creation.

This judgment was made by Hamer nearly fifteen years ago (the date of the French edition of his work is 1949). Recognizing, therefore, that it might possibly be subject to revision in light of further studies—his own and those of others—the distinguished author has written an entirely new introduction to the present translation. Therein he acutely summarizes the positions and conclusions of three other Catholic critics of Barth's work: H. U. von Balthasar, H. Bouillard, and H. Küng. Still, Hamer's judgment remains substantially the same, and this notwithstanding the apparently more sympathetic views of the theologians just mentioned.

Küng's thesis on Barth's doctrine of justification is well known. He sees in it a close approximation of the Catholic doctrine as expounded in the decrees of the Council of Trent. Concerning this, Hamer observes that the agreement, if admitted, "touches only a limited point cut off by [Barth's] method from the whole ensemble into which it is inserted and without a direct consideration of its consequences."²

Likewise, of von Balthasar's assertion that, in accord with Barth's approach toward a more sane statement of the doctrine of analogy, his ecclesiology has been profoundly modified, Hamer says: "This thesis of Barth [concerning the primacy of the Christian community] is not independent

¹ Jérôme Hamer, O.P., *Karl Barth*. Translated by Dominic M. Maruca, S.J. Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1962. Pp. xxxviii + 300. \$4.95.

² *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

of the ensemble of his thought; *it is an immediate consequence of his theological anthropology.*"³

Finally, Hamer's consideration of H. Bouillard's magisterial work on Barth gives him occasion to restate with perhaps greater insight, if not with as great amplitude, the judgment at which he arrives in the body of the study. Bouillard had concluded that the radical question in Barth's system is Christological. Does Barth really understand the decree of Chalcedon in the sense in which it is held according to Catholic tradition? Or does he, on the contrary, see the Incarnation as a substitution of natures, divine and human? Bouillard had also recognized that if these questions remain, we may ask further whether or not Barth can accord a normal place in the theological endeavor for philosophical reflection and historical analysis.

On these bases Hamer is able to conclude that an adequate critique of Barth's thought depends equally on an accurate understanding of the supernaturalism of faith, wherein human integrity, far from being compromised, is safeguarded and enhanced. In effect, he is suggesting that we ponder carefully the content of St. Thomas' definition of the act of faith: "actus intellectus assentientis veritati divinae ex imperio voluntatis a Deo motae per gratiam."⁴ Putting aside the question of a habitual and virtuous possession of such an assent, we must recognize the importance of every term in this lapidary formula. In faith the human mind and will are moved, each in its own order, by God. Is this divine motion such that it effects a real participation by man in the life of the hidden God?

The eminent Protestant scholar and editor of the English translation of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, T. F. Torrance,⁵ gives what seems to be an unequivocally Barthian answer to this latter question: "The knowledge of God in his Word is the knowledge of faith. But faith understands its knowledge, not as man's own act, nor as the act of God and man, but as the exclusive act of God, as the informing of man by the Word of God."⁶

This statement is against the background of a well-organized study of those writings of Barth which precede chronologically his undertaking of the *Church Dogmatics*. Torrance's thesis, in the main, is that Barth's thought has developed from dialectics to dogmatics. Does this mean that his dialectics and dogmatics are oriented in different directions? We need not interpret Torrance's thesis in this sense. No one would deny that the Barth who was a

³ *Ibid.*, p. xxvii; the italics are Hamer's.

⁴ *Sum. theol.* 2-2, q. 2, a. 9 c.

⁵ T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931*. London: SCM Press, 1963. Pp. 231. \$5.00. U.S. distributors: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., Naperville, Ill.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

student and devotee of Harnack and the Barth who twice commented on Paul's Epistle to the Romans (successive editions in 1919 and 1921) are different. It may even be admitted that Barth's views on the use of existential modes of thought and his understanding of the relation between theology and culture have been modified somewhat since the early twenties. Still, could it not be justly affirmed that the dogmatic thinking of Barth is ruled and limited by this judgment of his concerning faith?

Torrance's work is a good introduction to Barth in that it brings out the various relations interior to his thought. The effect, however, of his study is not such as to shake our conviction that the essence of the act of faith has always been and still is the crucial question. Nor is this conviction affected substantially by a perusal of some of the very writings Torrance uses in his analysis.⁷ On the contrary, it is corroborated somewhat. Furthermore, we do have the opportunity here of touching close to the reason for the centrality of this preoccupation, and thus of gaining some sympathy for the gigantic effort within Protestantism of which Karl Barth is the author. In other words, we are able to perceive here the real limiting factor in the development of his thought, insofar as it is authentically Protestant.

As to the corroboration of the conviction that the question of the essence of the act of faith remains crucial to the understanding of Barth, the essay on "The Concept of the Church"⁸ is perhaps the best entrée. In this lecture, given in 1927, Barth takes one by one the attributes predicated of the Church in the Nicene Creed, showing that there is an apparent consensus between Catholicism and Protestantism on each of them. Having said this, he refers to the statement of the Roman Catechism, in which it is affirmed that this divine reality of the Church is "known only by faith." Then he continues: "If we agreed on the meaning of these . . . words, there would be no division of the Church, there would be no need to add the cognomen 'Catholic' or 'Evangelical' to the name Christian. Then it would be possible—I speak advisedly—to discuss from that starting point everything else, Papacy and sacrament, dogma and ritual."⁹ What follows is a straightforward statement of his insights concerning the God-man relation in faith, wherein we read: "We Protestants understand by *faith* men's receiving of and laying hold on the grace of God. . . . [Yet] man is a sinner whose communion with God at any time is never possible and actual in any way except from God's side. . . . Our relation to God is, in distinction to all other relations, irreversible."¹⁰

⁷ Karl Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920-1928*. Translated by L. P. Smith; introduction by T. F. Torrance. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. Pp. 358. \$6.00.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 272-85.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 280-81.

What limits, then—one might be tempted to ask, what vitiates—such statements, which when read out of context appear to be true or at least to contain some truth? The answer is precisely that: the context. From the bulk of the other essays in this volume it becomes clear that Barth is writing in reaction to the liberal “tradition” initiated by Schleiermacher. Of course, this startles no one, but we ought not to pass by without pondering the meaning of this fact.

Its importance, especially in relation to modern theological trends, may be seen if we consider how this reaction of Barth against Schleiermacher¹¹ parallels what occurred within the Catholic Church at the time of the Modernist crisis. Barth inveighs against Schleiermacher’s notion of the feeling of total dependence on God as the Ground of Being with the same force and in apparently the same sense the Holy Office employed in 1907 in opposition to the Modernists. In fact, Barth might well have framed against Schleiermacher the proposition of *Lamentabili* which characterizes this aspect of Modernism: “Revelatio nihil aliud esse potuit quam acquisita ab homine suae ad Deum relationis conscientia.”¹² The difference, however, between the Barth-Schleiermacher and the Catholic-Modernist oppositions is to be noted. As regards the latter, the problem raised in the Modernist controversy, namely, that of the relation between history and faith—or, perhaps better, between experience and doctrinal or dogmatic conceptualization—is not considered to be altogether solved by a single trenchant statement of the magisterium. The condemned proposition just cited does tell us something, in a negative way, about the relation. Further precisions are to be had from the document in which the proposition is found, taken as a whole, provided that it be understood in the context of that concrete situation. But Catholic theologians continue to seek for a full solution to the problem in the tradition!

Immersion in the tradition as a source of balance seems to be precisely that which Karl Barth lacks; and on this account, whereas we cannot but have sympathy for him as a theologian, we still cannot accord him agreement on the level of doctrine. He is caught, it appears, in the dialectic which is inherent in Protestantism, the vacillation between the type of transcendentalism which is Barth’s own style and the immanentism represented by Schleiermacher. Only the broad perspective furnished by the amplitude of Catholic tradition could possibly correct this defect. The present situation serves to manifest concretely the tragedy of a theology which is imbedded in a dissident tradition.

¹¹ See, in particular, *ibid.*, pp. 136–216.

¹² *DB* 2020.

Does this mean that Barth has not done a service to Protestantism as a whole? History will deliver the final judgment; in the meantime we can only offer our conjecture. The slight volume of essays which has appeared since Barth's tour of the U.S. in the spring of 1962 may serve as a basis.¹³ The purpose of this collection is to determine the position of theology in relation, not to the *universitas litterarum*, but rather to its object, "the philanthropic God himself,"¹⁴ and then to offer certain guides concerning the conditions in which the theologian can best accomplish his task. Two things can be noted about this placing of theology. First, Barth is insistent on the objectivity of theological science. Theology is not a science about faith, but about God. Taking its origin in that Word over which it has no control, theology depends absolutely on the biblical witness. If this position were accepted, it would doubtless constitute a gain for Protestantism, especially in relation to the liberalism so characteristic of the last hundred years.

The second thing to be noted is not so encouraging, though neither is it a new position for Barth. In his own words, "special theological science . . . is related to the community and its faith in roughly the same manner as jurisprudence is related to the state and its law."¹⁵ This statement brings us right back to the question of the essence of the act of faith. This time, however, it puts us into the context of the community or the Church ("From a theological point of view it is best to avoid the word 'Church' as much as possible, if not altogether"¹⁶). The question is, then: Does theology grow out of the faith of the community, passed on authentically in a tradition, which is an accurate conceptualization of the original community experience? Or does theology sit in judgment on the faith of a community which is bereft of a real experience, in the sense that it cannot call the experience its own?

To say that the latter is Barth's final position might seem to be a harsh judgment (and it is certainly not meant as a denial of the grand stature of this Protestant thinker), but it seems necessary in light of his latest observations about faith. "What happens in the event of faith is that the Word of God frees one man among many for faith itself. This is the motivation of faith; something is 'moved' and something really 'takes' place. . . . Although strictly speaking he 'is' not this man, he is allowed to become this man again

¹³ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*. Translated by Grover Foley. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963. Pp. xiii + 206. \$4.00.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

and again when this object finds and confronts him anew, enabling and requiring him to affirm, trust, and obey itself."¹⁷

The ambivalence remains, and it is difficult to see how it can be overcome. The objectivity and transcendence of God are affirmed. Still, on account of man's radically depraved nature, the activity of the transcendent God, who is *totaliter aliter*, is never permitted to take hold of, to transform, and to establish that communion which is the reality of the Church of God.¹⁸

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¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

¹⁸ Cf. M. B. Schepers, O.P., "The Work of the Holy Spirit: Karl Barth on the Nature of the Church," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 23 (1962) 625-36.