

On September 19 of last year Karl Barth wrote a letter to a Professor in Prague, a letter on which Reinhold Niebuhr in Radical Religion (Winter, 1938) commented

"Barth, the exponent of dialectical theology, has proved himself to be not sufficiently dialectical. In all the years before this crisis his 'no' to the problem of culture and civilization was too unreserved, and in the hour of crisis his 'yes' is too unreserved." (Quoted in Theology, March, 1939).

The background to Barth's letter to the Professor in Prague is to be found in the booklet translated under the title Church and State. The booklet consists simply of a paper - a very long paper - read at a gathering in the town of Brugg of Reformed clergy of Canton Argau on the 20th of June 1938.

The date is important in view of the subsequent discussion of what is called Barth's new position, and it is unfortunate that in this translation the date of the original paper is not given.

The circumstances too are interesting. Barth was the Vicar of Safenwil in the Canton of Argau when he wrote his Romerbrief. Thus Barth gave this paper to his own people, presided over by one who had known Barth while he was still a young minister.

Further, Brugg is halfway between Basle, the University of Barth's influence, and Zurich, the University of Brunner's. Barth and Brunner had previously met in a village in Canton Argau to see if they could agree on the question of their attitude to Natural Theology, but neither had been able to yield a point. Amongst those who heard this paper and who took part in the subsequent discussion there were disciples and collaborators of Brunner. All these factors warn us against supposing that Barth has really given away his central position, however much in this paper he may appear to have done so.

Barth's concern in this paper was to expound the teaching of the New Testament concerning the true nature of the state. The true state is the heavenly Jerusalem, and of this state the Christians are already citizens. They are therefore strangers in any earthly state. Yet the earthly state derives its dignity from the heavenly Jerusalem. "The State as such, belongs originally and ultimately to Jesus Christ" (p.29). Its task on earth is to administer justice. So long as the earthly state gives freedom to the Church to proclaim the Gospel - God's justification of man through Christ - that state may be described in a derivative sense as a just state. This freedom the democratic states do accord to the Church. But the state may become, and in this sinful world does become, the 'demonic' state. The 'demonic' state no longer does justice,

no longer gives freedom to the Church. Then the state is false from its true nature. "In this encounter of Pilate and Jesus the 'demonic' State does not assert itself too much but too little; it is a State which at the decisive moment fails to be true to itself." (p.21). Only the Church can recall the state to its true nature. Thus to recall the state is the primary duty of the Church to the state. This duty is fulfilled first by prayer for the state, and for those who exercise authority. But the Christian's duty cannot stop with prayer: it must pass on to action, to political action, even to revolutionary political action - "we may have to 'overthrow with God' those rulers who do not follow the lines laid down by Christ" (p.80) even to defensive military action against the unjust state - "we are right in seeking to defend our frontiers" (p.76).

But, though Barth speaks of a just state, and reminds the Christian of his duty to that, and every other kind of, state, Barth never forgets that earth is not heaven, not even a miniature heaven.

Barth is always a preacher, conscious not only of his responsibility to the Word of God, but also of his obligation to utter that Word in the concrete human situation. The Romerbrief was uttered to the world of liberalism, a profound

warning against a too facile equation of Christian and political action. Its consequence was that the Christian found himself impotent to do anything because all action is sinful. To this man Barth has now spoken of the duty of action, yes of political action. But he has not forgotten that that political action will still be sinful action. He has simply stressed the duty to act.

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