

in "Student" 117

REVALUATIONS.

There has been, on the whole, a strange and significant silence in the "Student" this year on the subject of Karl Barth. Where are the Barthians? It is well known that a surprisingly large number of them have one by one blossomed forth as Oxford Groupers in the course of the past twelve months. Early in the year it was "authoritatively" rumoured that the present writer was among these. This rumour is completely without foundation. I too, however, have a "confession" to make of departures from the precise position of Barth at various points. For instance, I am becoming increasingly convinced that we must give a far more respectful consideration to the traditional "proofs of the existence of God" than Barth accords to them.

Despite this enormous concession, however, and many others, I still regard Barth as fundamentally right as against the vast majority of his opponents, including Brunner, and most definitely including Heim—far more right, in fact, than he probably realises. He is fundamentally right, for instance, in setting the New Testament firmly against the background of the Old, and *not* against the background of "the religious aspirations of mankind." He is fundamentally right—and has the New Testament, as well as the Reformers, behind him—in making theological discussion centre round differences within the Church, rather than differences between the Church and "the world." He is fundamentally right in maintaining a defiantly "supernaturalistic" position rather than a "dialectical" alternation of supernaturalness and something else. And he is fundamentally right in rejecting special arguments "ad hominem" as preparatory labour for the presentation of the Christian Gospel (or, I should like to add, for anything else). Speaking generally, I should say that all criticisms of Barth as being "too extreme" are very much beside the mark. Indeed, criticism of that kind is almost *always* wrong. The Communist Party, for instance, is usually criticised as being "too extreme" in its advocacy of revolutionary Socialism; but the real trouble with the Communist Party is that it does not take its own central idea seriously enough—and is at the moment, for instance, calling upon all and sundry to fight in defence of that essentially "bourgeois" principle, "democracy."

Barth also does not always take his own central ideas sufficiently seriously. There is a certain philosophical disease called "idealism" of which Barth's theology has not properly freed itself, despite the fact that *no* theologian (with the possible exception of the nineteenth century Englishman, F. D. Maurice) has ever made a more determined attempt to rid himself of this poison than Barth has made, and is continually making. I believe that

the theology of the future is as bound to build on a basis the main outlines of which have been sketched by Karl Barth, as the sociologists of the future are bound to build on a basis the main outlines of which have been sketched by Karl Marx. But in both cases they will have to submit more readily to the discipline of facts and logic, and cease to confuse questions of the form, "Is this the case?" with questions of the form, "How do we know this?"

The important questions for theology are questions of the form, "Is this statement about God *true*?" not questions of the form, "How do I believe this?" or even, "Do I believe this?" It has to be recognised that the question as to the falsehood of our belief is different from the question of our unbelief. We can pray, "Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief," but it is meaningless to pray, "Lord, I believe, and my belief is false, but please make it true," and wicked to pray, "Lord, I believe, and my belief is false; but make me go on believing all the same." The Reality of God is deeper than all our doubts, and unaltered by them, if He is real—there is our comfort. But if He is *unreal*, His unreality is deeper than all our certitude—there is our peril. And there is *no* way of evading this. Barth tries to evade it, often; all his critics, without exception, far more often.

The most common of all our evasions of this central issue, and one to which Barth also gives countenance, is the denial that the essence of theology can be properly stated in *propositions*. A proposition is simply a statement of what is or is not the case. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" is a proposition. A more important proposition, no doubt, than "God exists"; but a proposition nevertheless. We may believe it, and we may not; and what is more to the point, it may be the case, and it may not be the case, and if it is not the case, no amount of "believing" it will make it so. Barth has emphasised this to the point of being condemned by Brunner as an "intellectualist"; but even Barth does not emphasise it enough. It cannot be emphasised enough. ARTHUR N. PRIOR.

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