THE BARTH-NIEBUHR CONTROVERSY

Several adverse comments and hostile criticisms have appeared in the U.S. journals and newspapers commenting on Karl Barth's letter to a Pastor in the German Democratic Republic. The latest one by Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr appeared in the pages of the Christian Century of last week.

Karl Barth is continuing a tradition of letter writing which made him deservedly famous in the war years. His letters to Britain and France were of signal worth; they contained Christian insight which had political relevance. Now he has written to the Christians in Eastern Europe. The burden of his comments obviously do not accord with the views of most Christians in America. More the reason, therefore, why Christians, who make a too easy identification of the American way of life with the fate of the Gospel, should try to understand "this other point of view".

One of the frightening things in the Western world is the way which the power conflict between East and West has been twisted into a simple ideological battle between "God" and the "anti-Christ". "Oh Lord, help us in this fight" - an English Padre prayed in World War I - "we know that the Germans too ask that Thou shouldst help them, it is difficult for Thee to decide, Oh Lord, at least be neutral". We might find this "theology" amusing to-day, but perhaps, it will serve to awaken our eyes to similar theological aberrations of which we are guilty.

Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr in criticising Dr. Barth attempts some defence of Western Colonialism to meet Barth's suggestion that perhaps judgment of the West will come from Asia and Africa. Certainly Western Colonialism was not all evil. But we should remember that when the West held the fortunes of the world, unchallenged, in ther hands, in the 19th century, "Christian civilization" gave the world "colonialiem", a theory of white race supremacy, and American isolationism. And that after 150 years of Western benevolence Asia and Africa are described as "under-developed" areas, while China after ten years of Communism has almost come into the elite company of the "haves." In part, the success of Marxism both in Eastern Europe and in Asia stems from the failure of the Free West to deliver the goods when it had the opportunity to do so.. Barth is right to suggest that "judgment will come".

Christians in the West would do well to consider how sensitive they are to the "to-getherness" of Christians in the ecumenical Church across the iron curtain when they identify the fortunes of the West with Christianity or urge Christians in the East to offer resistance to the State. It is easy to call on others to be martyrs and equally easy to fail to appreciate the extent to which Christians in the West are guilty of political "accommodation".

It is certainly true that ideologically Marxism and Christianity are opposed as Christianity equally seriously opposes all worship of "mammon" in its divers Western forms. Christians in both parts of the world are called on to remain true to their faith and at the same time to work to maintain State order against any movement to anarchy.

Later R. For Royal working copus

Over

Reference is made in the Barth articles to Hungary. No one doubts that terrible things were done in that unfortunate land. But we must ask whether those who instigated the revolt were not dreamers who failed to take due cognisance of the limitations which the dilemma of power imposes on all of us? With the balance of power so delicately poised as between Russia and the West, and with the memory of her terrible sufferings in the German war, the "dreamers" should have known that the Russians would act, to protect her Western frontiers. Indeed, the Russian action reveals the extent to which the Hungarian situation made her panic. But in a world of power realities, such action is understandable. Would the United States watch a nearby country go Communist and not succomb to the temptation to prevent such a development? I think the answer is obvious.

BRYAN DE KRETSER Colombo, Ceylon

Visiting Associate Professor of Missions, University of Chicago.