

Book Reviews

FIDES QUAERENS INTELLECTUM

By Karl Barth. Translated by Ian W. Robertson (S.C.M. Press, London), 1960, pp. 173; 25/-.

The so-called ontological argument for God's existence associated with the name of Anselm has always intrigued the philosophers, though it has often failed to convince them. Refuted by one and recast by another, it preserves its strange vitality. The point of Karl Barth's masterly exegesis of Proslogion ii-iv is that the philosophers have really no rights in this matter, that what Anselm offers is theology of the purest water, and that nothing could be farther from the truth than to suppose he wants to demonstrate God's existence *a priori*. Nor is this contention to be taken lightly; few commentators can have devoted such pains to set these chapters in the whole context of Anselm's thinking, as few have probed so carefully each detail of the text. Barth insists that Anselm is seeking, as he says he is, to understand what he believes, and that in all his writings what he wants to understand is the faith he holds within the Church, the faith that rests entirely on revelation, yes, "the Word of those who preach Christ." He asks therefore not at all *whether* an item in this faith is true, but *how far* and *in what sense* it is true. His method is to single out a particular article in the Creed and to show that it follows from, coheres with, other articles assumed to be known.

The chapters in question in the Proslogion show him at work in precisely this way. He "proves" the existence of God not, as some have supposed, from a concept that is part of the furniture of the human mind as such, but from "the revealed Name of God." God is *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*. (By a slip, the "*maius*" is omitted on p. 73.) The two arguments that follow, one "that God truly is," and the other "that He cannot be thought of as not existing," are treated as marking two distinct stages in Anselm's procedure. In the first (Proslogion ii) God's existence is established in the sense in which anything is said to exist, not *in intellectu* only but also *in re*. In the second (Proslogion iii) we advance to the demonstration of God's existence in the strict and peculiar sense, that in which He is the source of all existence and not merely one existent among many. The conclusion reached is that the denial of God's existence is possible only to the fool, who in fact is all the while denying something that is not to be identified with God Himself. Yet, as Barth constantly reminds us, in all this what we have is not what we have been led to suppose, a construction *a priori*, but "the proof of an article of faith which still holds good apart from all proof."

To criticise Barth's exposition is for those only who have devoted the time to the subject that he has given. There can be no doubt that anyone who proposes to take Anselm seriously will have to do the same with this book. Certainly, the context of worship and prayer in which the argument is set is of decisive importance for the understanding of it. Anselm throws into the form of a train of reasoning what has been borne in upon him as a worshipper who stands within the tradition of the Church. But there are still some questions one would like to put to Barth. Is the clear-cut distinction between theology and philosophy with which he operates one that can be carried back without qualification into the early Middle Ages? Again, though every other sentence is most carefully investigated, Barth has little to say of the one that points most strongly in the direction opposed to that which he takes. It runs: "I thank thee, good Lord, I thank thee, that what I at first believed because of thy gift, I now know because of thy illumining in such a way that *even if I did not want to believe*