

Criticism in the Christian World



Books

Philosophy and Theology

FREEDOM AND REASON. By R. M. Hare. Oxford University Press, \$2.40.

A GENERAL THEORY OF AUTHORITY. By Yves R. Simon. University of Notre Dame Press, \$5.95.

THREE PATHS IN PHILOSOPHY. By James Collins. Regnery, \$7.50.

THE GREAT PROMISE. By Karl Barth. Philosophical Library, \$2.75.

THEOLOGY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH. Edited by Robert W. Bertram. Fortress, \$5.00.

THE MODERN THEOLOGY OF TRADITION. By J. P. Mackey. Herder & Herder, \$4.75.

KARL BARTH: AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS EARLY THEOLOGY, 1910-1931. By Thomas F. Torrance. S.C.M. Press, \$5.00.

THE ENCOUNTER WITH GOD. Edited by Joseph E. O'Neill, S.J. Macmillan, \$4.00.

† A GLIMPSE at a few of the new books on the market is enough to prove that some rather exciting ideas are currently on public display. The following sampling of works in ethics, philosophy of religion, and theology will illustrate the point.

R. M. Hare's *Freedom and Reason* is put together with a care like that of a contractor constructing a new building. Hare wants to build a philosophy of morals entirely from the data of experience and the law of contradiction. The law of contradiction says that a thing can't both be and not be, at the same time, with the same attributes. If a person says that one cat is good, he is bound in consistency to "admit that if there had been another cat . . . like the first one in all, or in all relevant, respects, the second cat would have been a good one too." So far, so good. Moral principles must be universal and they must be prescriptive.

But how, we feel constrained to ask, can we be sure that cats *are* like one another, even in relevant respects; for who has the right to decide what is relevant? And even more troublesome, how can we gain an intimate knowledge of a fellow human being (in order that we might be able to judge points of similarity between him and ourselves) unless he chooses to reveal the true nature of his person? In this case we must rely on revelation, the revelation which he makes to those who give spirit-

ual signs of accepting the dignity of his person. In sum, though both logic and the data of experience are important, each faces critical limitations unless love opens the way for revelation.

A General Theory of Authority is a learned defense of the indispensable role which duly authorized authority plays in the lives of sincere individuals and in the fabric of a stable society. Simon succeeds in his defense because he combines sound reasoning with common sense. Such a combination is not met very often.

Whoever has desired a major publication which concerns itself with questions of human interest while it is dealing with the complexity of philosophic systems, may stop searching. In *Three Paths in Philosophy* James Collins has assembled an impressive body of peripheral as well as central information about three currently influential schools of thought: existentialism, naturalism and theistic realism. He is an author whose name is already well known in philosophic circles, and his new book will in no way detract from his reputation. Quite to the contrary, the book is a very able piece of scholarship and will stand up under any reasonable scrutiny.

Haste may try to dismiss Karl Barth's *The Great Promise* as nothing but another very ordinary commentary on the first chapter of Luke. But care will sense Barth's unique touch: 70 pages, centered on the person of Jesus Christ, which convey a rich, satisfying experience to the reader. Barth can make familiar verses movingly existential.

A symposium by 14 Lutheran scholars, *Theology in the Life of the Church* points up what I feel is a disturbing paradox in Christianity. On the one hand, the ideal of ministering to the whole church is cheerfully accepted; on the other, a finality is assigned to Lutheran confessions which is remarkably similar to that which Catholics assign to Catholic confessions. This paradox makes me ask, What is theological dialogue, anyway? Jaroslav Pelikan—who contributed the first article, "The Functions of Theology," and who plays the role of a prophet by speaking *against* as well as *to* the status quo in Lutheranism—suggests, among more serious reasons, that a theologian has to support his own confessional heritage because his grocery bill is being paid by the denomination of which he is a part. Candor of this sort brings more than a smile. It is a

stark reminder that vested interest is the most stubborn foe of true ecumenicity in the church.

A book of this kind can be profitably read by Lutherans and non-Lutherans alike, for not only are its pages graced by a spirit of Christian sincerity, but the various topics are discussed with an eye to the limits which original sin places upon history.

The most fascinating part of *The Modern Theology of Tradition* is the skillful way in which humble, receptive attitudes are combined with the fixed tradition that the Magisterium (the Roman Catholic Church viewed as a living teacher) is infallible in all official questions. Although there is a surprising variety of efforts to explain how the church came into possession of its power of infallibility, there is a fixed conviction that the church is infallible. "It is easier to describe the influence of the Holy Spirit on the faithful by which he helps them to receive and assimilate the infallible teaching of the Magisterium than it is to explain how in fact the Holy Spirit renders the Magisterium infallible." Thus it is of no matter whether the bodily assumption of Mary was included in the original apostolic tradition or whether it came to the church by later revelation. The dogma is final in either case; it is part of Catholic tradition.

The central themes in Barth's theology can be stated so easily—the themes, namely, that God is God, man is man, and Christ is Mediator—that we may be tempted to think that they really dropped out of heaven in a fixed form at the very beginning of Barth's career. T. F. Torrance in *Karl Barth* unmasks this error by citing the actual ingredients which brought about the evolution of Barth's theology from 1910 to 1931. If there is a better book on this subject, I am not aware of it. Torrance makes it clear that a theologian must learn to walk before he can run. Critical changes took place as Barth the early dialectician became Barth the full-fledged dogmatist. The pathway to maturity was never clearly marked out, nor was it ever easy to walk on. Although it is true that Barth has consistently opposed those who reduce Christianity to an extension of worldly wisdom, this fixity of spirit has not converted him into a venerated high priest in theology; for he has always been attentive to the verdict of new evidences. "If we claim to have too perfect an understanding of the Gospel,"

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the Rev. Franklin Jensen, pastor of Luther Memorial Church and president of the Erie council of churches. Rabbi Bernard Perelmuter of the Temple pronounced the Aaronic benediction, in Hebrew and in English.

For several years the World and National councils of churches have been emphasizing that real ecumenicity must begin at the local level. In Erie, the Catholic community has taken the lead by giving a gracious demonstration