

GERMANY'S WAR OF RELIGIONS

Karl Barth Surveys the Scene

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By the Rev. Professor R. BIRCH HOYLE

THE rain of pamphlets on the religious strife in Germany falls "thick as the leaves of Vallambrosa." But the reign of truth is difficult to find. As Karl Barth said at Berne in January, and again in March at Oxford, "Historians in later days will have much to ponder and to say, when they attempt to explain how the struggle in the German Churches came about, how two great opponents faced each other."

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He inclines to think there are two: "the Church of Jesus Christ and the National Socialist State of Adolf Hitler." Other observers think there are more than two: in fact, three or four parties waged in conflict. Lutheran faces Reformed; Roman Catholicism faces both: Romans, Evangelical Church and Reformed also face the religion of the Volk. And the worship of German nationhood (*Volkstum*) has its parties; Rosenberg, with his German myths of Wodin and Thor; William Hauer, with his Indo-Germanic, plus Eckehard—Luther and Bach faith. And nine-tenths of Germans make a "god" of Adolf Hitler. "It is difficult," says Barth, "to describe and set out the story of the last five years: the forces and tendencies are to-day often secret and ambiguous."

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One dominant purpose, however, is as plain as a pike-staff. All the forces of the nation, intellectual, religious, economic and military, have to be joined up to serve the present State, and to think as Hitler decrees. On one tombstone occur the words: "Died in the faith of Adolf Hitler." The Gotha "Observer" (9.xi.35) had this marriage announcement: "In the faith of the Divine revelation of our nation in Adolf Hitler, to-day, Willi Liffert and Selma Liffert have taken marriage for life." The "German Faith-Movement" went so far as to say, "Christ has come to us through Adolf Hitler. He has been the decisive man to whom a whole nation is ready to submit. Hitler struck for us in himself by his force, his honesty; the Saviour (*Heiland*) found for us His faith and His idealism."

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The two founders of this "German Faith-Movement," Julius Leutheuer and Siegfried Leffler, of Thuringia, carried idolatry of Hitler to such an extent that a leading Erlangen Lutheran professor, Paul Althaus, has had to write a special brochure, sold by thousands, to controvert that idolatry (*cf. Theologia Militans, Hefte, Politisches Christentum*: publisher, Deichertsche, Leipzig). A sentence or two of Leutheuer may be quoted as typical. "In the political confession of the German people to its leader, sent to it by God, shall be set up triumphantly faith in the conquering might of the Saviour of Nations." The 1933 Revolution, he says, "was as though we saw His (*i.e.*, God's) glory, the glory of the kingdom of God among Germans." "The German Faith can be none other than faith in the Reich, the faith of Jesus for the triumph of which it stands."

Leffler actually wrote: "We see God's revelation was not closed in ancient times: we see God living amongst us, and in our Führer, Adolf Hitler, His instrument for our days." Verily, for such Germans, God is German and Hitler is His prophet! The Old Testament can be discarded now: 1933 is the "Year of the Lord"! As these "German Faith" leaders wrote in their 28 Theses (No. 12): "The Old Testament, with its specific Jewish national ethic and religion, has been overcome. It remains important because it transmits the story and fall of a nation, which, in spite of God's revelation, separates itself always from Him. 1938 will be a second "Year of the Lord" on the "Germanic Church" Calendar. On April 10 Hitler saw in the Rape of Austria "the call of Providence," and himself as "the instrument of God's will!"

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Professor Barth, in his lecture, at Berne (*Not und Verheissung in deutschen Kirchenkampf*: Beg. Bern, Fr. (Swiss) 50): the substance in English, "Struggle and Promise in the Struggle of the Church in Germany" (Oxford University Press, 1s.) rightly sees in this conflict an outbreak against true Christianity and persecution of those not subscribing to the new "Germanic Religion." He clearly defines the two or three contestants: the "German Christians," made up of Lutherans, Reformed (*i.e.*, Calvinists), Conservatives and Liberals, even strict Pietists.

These applauded the new great Church and backed the new State. "This group had the support of the all-powerful Nazi party, the police, the Government right up to Hitler." Against them came the "Confessional Party"; not a counter-party, but an association in defence of the Church whose "sub-

stance" had been attacked. This group stands for adherence to the Bible and Church Confessions as sole ruling authority over Christ's Church. Barth passes over the "German Faith Group," who are partly among the "German Christians"; though Rosenberg and Mathilde Ludendorff have "no truck" with Christianity. A third group—a large majority—are neutral. They "sit on the fence to see how the cat jumps." As Barth says, "they wait to see how things turn out, so as to be on the side of the bigger battalions, at the right time!"

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Barth divides his survey into two sections: the Distress and the Promise. Each section has three "heads." Under "Distress" they are: the Temptation; the Inner Strife; the Scorn and Oppression the "Confessionals" have to bear. The Temptation was "to take part in the great, joyous, general revival and re-invigoration that had come as a gift to Germany from an extraordinary hour of history." But under one simple condition, that "if the Church *now* behaved properly, and had *now* the courage to grasp and affirm the spirit of the new time, her hour had come when the great mass of the nation, 90 per cent., would now return to the Church they had forsaken."

All the Church had to do was to say 1933 was a revelation from God. "All this will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me!" Had she accepted, Barth says, she would have ceased to be a Christian Church.

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The Inner Strife has shattered the one Evangelical Church: friendships have been sundered, though under the same roof. The "Confessionals" cannot live at peace with men advocating anti-Christian heresy. True, Hitler promises a "positive Christianity"; glibly, religious phrases were used in 1933, but, says Barth, "to-day nearly all the masks have dropped": it is openly announced "no more Christianity" for "the duty of the German nation and State is itself the one religion, the true and right religion"! It has been said point-blank: "Germany, religiously viewed, has taken the place of Christianity: it embodies a claim of totality which dissolves the Biblical claim of totality." "The characteristic deep distress . . . is the outbreathing activity of one man who might put himself in the place of God," says Barth.

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The oppression is like "the slow turn of the thumbscrew." Men are defamed for loyalty to Church: preachers have secret police note-taking: a Church-goer, if a Nazi or public official, is soon "sent to Coventry": the religious press is stopped: liberty of public meeting put down: youth movements are compelled to join Hitler's Youths, whose leader is a confessed pagan: theological seminaries are closed down, and thus recruiting the future ministry hindered: university professors have been replaced by Nazis, poorly trained: finally, in Prussia, Church collections have been seized. On the other hand, Rosenberg is not hindered by the police when he scoffs at Christianity; they help him by suppressing any reply or criticism of his heathen views, Barth pertinently asks if Churches in other lands would have resisted the temptation put to the German Evangelical Church.

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Under the Promise there are three heads: the testing has revealed the real meaning of the Gospel: the true purpose of the Church: a new reality in the Word of God: a proof that Faith is a concrete reality.

"In these years a power has been displayed—the power of faith—which can match the power of the world: the only liberty is liberty in the believing soul. Where (continues Barth) have the Conservatives and Radicals gone? What has become of the German newspaper, the German university, theatre, German science and art, the schools, and German trade? What is Goethe to-day, and Fichte, and Hegel? How are their scholars all fallen down! How all of them bent before the breeze! This Government has known how to make all this subject to itself. There is no longer freedom to-day in Germany: except one: the freedom of faith!"

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The prospects for the future are bleak. Barth admits there is no scope for hero-worship in this war of religion; nor prophesying either Church defeat or victory. "We do not know that." But the warning is impressively sounded to Churches in other lands to set their house in order, lest they, too, fail as so many have failed—but not all—in Germany. The whole Christian Church throughout the world should stand by the brave Confessionals; and have them ever in their prayers; *solidaire* with the Church patient in Germany.