

# A Voice from Europe

**T**HE broadcast in the Third Programme by Karl Barth, reproduced on another page, is an important event. Barth is generally recognised to be one of the greatest—if not the greatest—of living theologians. His teaching, with its emphasis on the immensity of the gulf between God and man, creature and Creator, has profoundly influenced intellectual Europe, especially in the years since 1918 when western man has visibly been driven to one nemesis after another by his own pride and presumption. No one has opposed more effectively than Barth the man-centred perversion of Christianity which in decades of facile comfort, and as facile humanism, had infiltrated even within the Churches themselves. Now in this broadcast, from a position in Protestantism as respected as General Smuts' standing in democratic politics, he issues what is both a depressing estimate of the present state of organised Christianity and a general call to action.

Briefly, Barth is 'beginning to doubt' whether the much-needed reform of the Churches can succeed without help from outside, 'if', as he puts it, 'people outside the Churches do not come to their aid, as in the sixteenth century'. He lists what in his view are the main reasons why organised Christianity is out of touch with present reality: timidity, lack of clear-cut decisions on Christian principles, 'playing safe', refusing to back the right horse except when it is popular to do so. 'We can't breathe freely in your atmosphere', he sees the man of the world saying to the Church. 'For in your company one breathes the air of a law, or an outlook on life, the air of principles and postulates, not the air of life'. Also—he hears the voice of the world saying—there is little light and joy about present-day Christianity. 'When you'—the Churches—'make yourself heard it is usually with cares and complaints, lamentations and accusations—usually the lamentations and accusations belonging to a generation which is now old and was never really young'. To many Christians these and Barth's other charges may be familiar enough. What is new and momentous is Barth's doubt whether reform of the Church can succeed without help from outside.

It is difficult to follow Barth's thought here, but important to try to do so. He appears to be saying that the minority of reformers within the Church are powerless to break the shackles of Church diplomacy without external support. But where, some will ask, is that support to be found? Can we suppose that the non-believers, or disbelievers, of a largely secularised Europe are going to be interested in the reform of the Church? Or that, if they were, their support for reform would be along the lines that Barth and other Christians might desire? This seems on the face of it improbable. Or is Barth really more hopeful, believing Europe not to be so profoundly estranged from Christianity as is sometimes supposed: believing on the contrary that thousands may be looking for a faith, which would bring fresh moral cement for society, a faith which, re-stated and going back for inspiration to its origins, Christianity might provide?

*The Listener 31 Oct 1946*