

own suburb because it is so difficult to make contact *and to maintain it*. The slow piecemeal job for which there is often too little to show in terms of "results"—the job of showing that the church is vitally and unselfseekingly concerned about everything that affects the welfare of the neighbourhood—is the job of the layman, and it has to be done with a genuine prophetic touch (a quality which laymen hardly ever associate with their activities) "in the name of the Lord".

KATHLEEN BLISS.

## KARL BARTH AND COMMUNISM

[The names of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner are often conjoined in the Anglo-Saxon world as the leaders of the Reformed theology which now dominates European Protestantism. It is better known on the Continent that these two theologians differ profoundly from one another, sometimes even fiercely. Their differences have lately extended from the sphere of theological debate into the political arena, and this article explains where each at present stands.—Eds.]

KARL BARTH'S historic stand against the Nazi heresy is well known. He refused to take the oath of personal loyalty required of German professors and was suspended from teaching at Bonn. But for his Swiss citizenship there is little doubt that a worse fate would have befallen him. That he is not now standing out against the Communist menace to human freedom with comparable staunchness and rigidity has startled even some of his closest friends and has led in particular to a lively controversy with his friend Emil Brunner. Brunner says that the Church must address "an uncompromising 'No' to totalitarianism which in any form is irreconcilable with Christianity". Barth, on the other hand, denies that the Communist menace is comparable to that of the Nazis ten years ago. "History does not repeat itself" and the Church must discriminate

and not allow herself to be bullied into abstract and absolute condemnations, "thoughtless slogans" and "exaggerations".

A leading document in this Barth-Brunner controversy was a sermon published<sup>1</sup> by Barth under the title "The Church between East and West". This was published in the *World Review* last July and August and answered in the same journal by Christopher Hollis. But the background of the dispute is the visit to the Reformed Church in Hungary which Barth had made shortly before. His report on that visit provoked Brunner to his "Open Letter to Karl Barth", which has since been published, together with a number of other "Hungarian Documents"<sup>2</sup> containing Barth's detailed reply to Brunner's accusations. Neither of these booklets has appeared in this country, and as a pamphlet by Brunner on *Communism, Capitalism, and Christianity* has just come out in English,<sup>3</sup> it may be useful to attempt a brief summary of the argument that it re-opens.

Barth's message to the Reformed Church in Hungary gives the crux of his position. "Have the courage to use your own minds." "Do not believe that the Church has a ready-made recipe to apply to every political situation." Do not fall in with the totalitarians by becoming equally doctrinaire anti-totalitarians. Strive at all costs to maintain your freedom of judgment. Small-scale action is often more effective than wildly abstract verbal condemnations. Thus "the smallest parish church in a country village may be more important than the whole Amsterdam Conference". Above all, the Christian must try to see the great political upheavals of our time against the background of "the beginning and end of human history which are the Death and Resurrection and

<sup>1</sup> *Die Kirche zwischen Ost und West*, Evangelischer Verlag, Zollikon-Zurich.

<sup>2</sup> *Christliche Gemeinde im Wechsel der Staatsordnungen: Dokumente einer Ungarnreise*, Evangelischer Verlag, Zollikon-Zurich.

<sup>3</sup> *Communism, Capitalism, and Christianity*. By Emil Brunner. Lutterworth Press. 1s. 6d.

the Second Advent of Jesus Christ". Against that eschatological background of the Christian Gospel even the shattering political earthquakes of our day are but passing tremors on the surface of history. Again, the Christian must beware of exaggerating the devilishness of any political order. An "element of God's wisdom and patience" is present even in the worst. In so far as it "creates room for the fulfilment of the meaning of world history" every state is a "gift from God", a "divinely ordained measure to preserve human society from chaos" and the Christian duty should be not "sterile negation" but "prayerful participation" in this work of God.

The Church must offer neither absolute obedience nor absolute opposition to the "powers that be". Her primary task, from which she must not allow herself to be deflected by "thoughtless slogans", is to work for her own vital renewal, in a new understanding of the Bible, a new life of prayer and a new witness. From such inner renewal all other things will follow and a solid position will be attained from which she can view the happenings of the day with "unprejudiced calm". Her allegiance is not to systems and principles but to a living Master, whom she is called to serve in every situation sometimes by speech but sometimes also by the witness of silence.

It is not difficult to see matter for controversy here and Brunner's "Open Letter to Karl Barth" begins by asking how Barth reconciles his present attitude to Communist totalitarianism with his former uncompromising opposition to Nazi totalitarianism. It goes so far as to question whether Barth has ever really faced the problem of totalitarianism as such, and this is probably the central issue, for Barth maintains that "totalitarianism as such" is a "thoughtless slogan", an abstraction from an ever-changing, never static concrete political reality which it is dishonest to condemn in advance and without inside knowledge of the particular situation. It is to ignore the "concrete reality" in favour of a "prejudiced systematization of history". In

any case, Barth argues, if the question is "totalitarianism as such" why concentrate your guns on Communism so exclusively? What about Franco Spain, what about the Dutch "blitzkrieg" on the Indonesians ("which inevitably reminded one of certain proceedings in May 1940")? "This Christian battle-cry against Communism is in fact not quite honest. Therefore we refuse to join in it." Brunner replies that Communism is an even more systematic and ruthless attack on the freedom and rights of the human person than Nazism, which even at its worst was somewhat "diletante"; and the contrast of this view with Barth's can best be shown in Barth's own words:

"One cannot say of Communism as one was forced to say of Nazism that it is merely a product of sheer madness and criminality. It would be senseless to mention in the same breath the philosophy of Marxism and the ideology of the Third Reich, or to mention a man of the stature of Joseph Stalin in the same breath as such charlatans as Hitler, Goering, Hess, Goebbels, Himmler, Ribbentrop, Rosenberg, Streicher, and the rest. What has been tackled in Soviet Russia, albeit with very dirty and bloody hands and in a way that rightly shocks us, is after all the solution of a problem which is a serious and burning problem for us as well and which we, with our clean hands, have not yet tackled anything like energetically enough—the social problem. Our Western 'No' to the solution of this problem in Russia could only be a Christian 'No' if we had a better conscience with regard to what we mean by Freedom in the West, if we too were attempting a more humane but no less energetic solution to this problem. As long as one cannot say that of the West—with all due recognition of the good intentions of the British Labour Party—as long as there is still 'freedom' in the West to pour corn into the sea while people are starving, we Christians must refuse to hurl an absolute 'No' at the East."

Even more controversial is another distinction he draws between Nazism and Communism. Communism is not "anti-Christian", but merely "coldly non-Christian", whereas the "basic crime" of the Nazis was their attempt to foist a substitute religion, an Aryanized Germanic Jesus on the German people. Communism which is "brutally but

honestly Godless" makes no such attempt to present itself as "positive Christianity" and it was this attempt which made Nazism a spiritual "temptation" even for many within the Church. At least the Communist attitude is clear-cut. Whether it is possible to dismiss that attitude as merely "coldly non-Christian" since the Mindzsenty and the Bulgarian trials (and Barth was writing *after* both of them) most observers will hesitate to believe. But to Barth this "coldly non-Christian attitude" is in fact not much different from the "wisdom that is allowed to swagger about in the West in every street and every paper and even in some of our Churches". Such a statement forces us to ask if he is not indeed, as his friend Brunner claims, at any rate partially blind to the "concrete reality" of the Communist onslaught on the Church and Christianity in Eastern Europe (and now becoming more and more acute in Czechoslovakia). The Christian "No" to Communism is in any case directed not so much at the "energetic" solution of the "social problem" inside Russia, as at the tyrannical imposition of this solution on her unwilling satellites.

Brunner agrees that "to contrast the godless East" with the "Christian West" is "a great exaggeration". In the East too the Church survives and has probably gained in depth what it has lost in numbers through persecution. The Western Church has much to learn from Eastern Orthodoxy, but the Christian "No!" the "passionate and absolute Christian No!" is not being said, primarily, even to Communism "as such" but to the totalitarian claims which it makes upon persons and peoples outside its own sphere. But, rejoins Barth, if such opposition to Communism is pushed to the limit "the worst will come to the worst" again. Rather than emphasize and add to the conflict between East and West the Church should help the reconstructive forces which exist on both sides of the Iron Curtain by her own prayer and witness, "keeping herself in and through the Word of God that she may proclaim it to West and East alike with a joyful conscience."

As Brunner says at the end of his Open Letter, everything that Barth says is of "great influence" to-day. Barth refuses to join in the "Christian battle-cry against Communism". The "partisan" attitude which he called upon the Church to take against Nazism he will not assume towards Communism. All that such battle cries can consist of to-day is merely "cheap, idle, and useless talk". "If the worst were to come to the worst again as it did ten years ago then we should see who would then be fighting in the front rank: those who are calling for a definite word from the Church or those who believe that our only political strength now lies in quietness and hope."

STANLEY GODMAN.

## LETTER TO THE EDITORS

### MENTAL HEARING

Dear Sirs,

In the February issue of *The Frontier* a correspondent speaks of "a course of lessons in listening". He says that most of us nowadays fail to attend to what others are saying. "Most of us have noticed, in some conversation or other, that the other fellow has evidently missed the point of our argument because he was already thinking out his own next observation, or even reflecting upon his last."

I have myself belonged to a "school for listening" for now something like thirty-two years. I am still so far from being an adept that I blush for myself, and I must add that those who try this kind of listening continually fail in the same respect.

This however is what we are trying for. We are a very small group of people and yet we think ourselves sometimes too large. I think myself the ideal number is seven or eight and we, when nearly all are present, are more likely to be twenty. In fact there are other groups smaller than ours which hived off from us as bees do! But, all told, I think we do not number a hundred.

In a sense, our meeting is conducted like a Quaker meeting but it differs in important respects. For one thing, we know what we are all