

The Thought of Two Centuries



From Rousseau, the litterateur



—Bettmann Archive.

... to Ritschl, the theologian

"Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl," by Karl Barth (Harper, 435 pp., \$7), includes eleven essays in which the distinguished theologian discusses those thinkers whose works have affected his own thought. Henry P. Van Dusen, who has written many studies of religion, is the president of Union Theological Seminary.

By Henry P. Van Dusen

VISITORS to Karl Barth's study in Basle have reported their amazement to discover its walls dominated by two large photographs, one of Mozart, the other of Schleiermacher. Barth's admiration for Mozart, verging on veneration, is well known; it furnishes the theme for his contribution to the recently published *Festschrift* in honor of Paul Tillich. There Barth proudly confesses that "for years and years" each day's labor on the great "Dogmatik" has been preceded by a period with Mozart's music. But Schleiermacher! Was he not the "Father of Modern Theology," the fountain-source of most of the aberrations which Karl Barth has devoted a lifetime of labor to expose and confute? Is not Schleiermacher cast in a satanic role as *bête noire* of Neo-orthodox protest and whippingboy of its polemic? If the astonished visitor is bold enough

to voice his surprise, his host may reply indulgently, "Schleiermacher—he is the father of us all!"

Each picture is symbolic: Mozart of Barth's wide-ranging culture, and also of an unsuspected sentiment which is close to sentimentality. Schleiermacher, as evidence that the picture of Barth as an extreme and dogmatic rebel against his own intellectual and theological heritage, is a caricature, indeed the direct obverse of the truth.

Of the latter, much-needed corrective of the all too familiar caricature of Karl Barth, this volume is the definitive proof. It consists of eleven essays, originally lectures in his classroom at Bonn a quarter-century ago, drawn from a more inclusive German work. An introductory diagnosis of "Man in the Eighteenth Century" provides the setting and connecting theme for a critical exposition of ten representative thinkers of that and the following centuries.

Professor Jaroslav Pelikan, in an admirable introduction to this American edition, fastens upon two qualities which inform the entire book. First, the reach of Barth's interest and the breadth of his erudition are suggested in his choice of subjects, which includes not only the theologians Herder, Schleiermacher, and Ritschl, but the philosophers Kant and Hegel, and also the poet Novalis,

the *litterateur* Rousseau, and the sociologist Fuerbach. And the same immense learning which illumines every page of his "Church Dogmatics" with apt and acute comments upon the whole corpus of classical Christian theology appears here. Second, perhaps the most unexpected features of a survey which ranges over such diverse minds are the "depth of his understanding" and the sympathy of his interpretation. There could be no more impressive witness to the real greatness of this man of strong and militant convictions than his disciplined determination to get inside minds and spirits so utterly different and uncongenial to his own. Only in the case of Ritschl is the treatment cursory and perfunctory. One can imagine a heavenly conclave of most of these intellectual giants, who would have found it difficult to agree on anything on earth, vying with one another to pay amazed and grateful tribute: "Karl Barth has understood me perfectly!"

The importance and value of this work are twofold. First, as an introduction to the thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is certainly one of the most enlightening and stimulating single volumes. Here its interest is in no sense limited to theologians but is for all who delight in the history of ideas and seek illumination on their own intellectual ancestry. These lectures must have excited Barth's students at Bonn and sent them scurrying to read the subjects' own writings; they may render a similar service to American readers of today.

Lastly, however, "Protestant Thought" is important as an indispensable introduction to the most powerful and influential theological mind of this century. This is the place to begin acquaintance with Karl Barth. Indeed, if one holds, as does this reviewer, that the obligatory prerequisite to understanding any man's thought is some knowledge of his intellectual biography—a thesis brilliantly vindicated by Barth himself in this book—then here is the *sine qua non* for discussions, not to speak of criticism, of Karl Barth. Any serious student must wish to follow the pilgrimage which formed and determined Barth's mind; now it can be made under his guidance. Doubtless the most immediate result will be a richer and profounder understanding of the movements of thought which have, largely unrecognized, molded the contemporary mind. But for many readers, an unintended by-product may well be enthusiastic friendship for the mind of the guide; for some, perhaps, even conversion to his discipleship.

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