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The British Weekly

THE TEACHING OF KARL BARTH

HAS IT ROMEWARD TENDENCIES?

The Latest German Comments

We wrote last week a short paragraph on Professor Wobbermin's small book, "Rechtlinien Evangelischer Theologie," which was published recently in Göttingen.* Further examination confirms our view that the author, while rejecting the cruder forms of fundamentalism, desires to establish the faith of the Evangelical Churches on the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture. He calls to his aid the works of great Protestant thinkers, from Luther to Schleiermacher and Barth, though his purpose and the limits of his space keep him within the German-speaking world. His intention is not in the main polemical, but rather expository, and though he differs at various points from the Barthian theology, he regards Professor Barth himself with sincere admiration, and attaches high importance to his writings. For students outside Germany there is interest in finding that Lutherans like Titius and Wobbermin have discovered in the so-called "dialectical theology" of Barth certain well marked affinities with Rome.

The author declares in his opening sentences that, since the close of the war, evangelical theology has been passing through a crisis. "That is a fact which no one who examines the situation frankly and with a full sense of realities can possibly mistake or deny." Nor is that crisis due to war neurosis. Its origins are traced back to the pre-war decades, and even to the time of Ritschl, who died in 1889. Two schools of thought have held sway in Lutheran Germany. One was the historical school, of which Harnack is the most distinguished living representative. Its leaders wished to concentrate the main work of theology on historical research, and believed that exploration of the early records would yield the necessary clues for the solution of all remaining problems. Opposed to this was the psychological school, which derives from the disciples of Schleiermacher rather than from that writer himself, and which is concerned in the main with the inner experience of the believer. Now we have the theology of Barth, who pours scorn on Schleiermacher, and some of whose followers, in the opinion of Wobbermin, have shamefully misrepresented the teachings of that great man.

Leaving the main arguments and declaratory statements of this book, we have noted a few passages in which Wobbermin suggests that Karl Barth has stepped aside from the straight road of the Reformers' teaching.

The Minimising of History

He has never recognised the importance of historical research for the work of evangelical theology. "In that he is at issue with the fundamental principles of the Reformation. For historical research and criticism are among its primary assumptions, in contrast to the neglect of history and the non-historical attitude of the Church of Rome."

Neither has Barth been able to grasp the full importance of the psychological school, with its deep glance into the inward experience and true life of the believing soul.

That psychological mode of thought belongs also to the first principles of the Reformation. It formed the background of Luther's attacks upon the Papal Church, and explains the strong importance he attached to the *testimonium spiritus sancti internum* (the witness of the Holy Spirit in inward experience).

The Doctrine of the Virgin Birth

The teaching of Barth on the Virgin Birth of our Lord is described as non-historical and non-psychological. "For he argues that in the history of the human race it was the man who was the really active agent of sin, and that therefore this male factor had to be excluded in the conception of Jesus, the Virgin Mary being chosen to give birth to God. . . . Such teaching is completely unhistorical, because it introduces into the New Testament narrative a consideration which is entirely foreign to it, and because it disregards the literary character of the story of the Infancy and the position of the Apostle Paul." Exception is taken merely to Karl Barth's suggestions; on the doctrine itself the writer leaves his own conviction unexpressed. Others have pointed out, he tells us, that the acceptance of the Barthian theory would have as its logical consequence the introduction into the Protestant Churches of services in honour of the Virgin Mary. A new "Marienkult" would arise.

Religion or Magic

The author of the "dialectical theology" is accused, in a severe passage, of seeking to transform religion into magic. He is said to be entirely without interest in the study of comparative religion, or of the history of religions. His own theories were set forth without the checks or controls which come from a thoughtful study of the spiritual experience of the race. He works with garish colours and ambiguous meanings. "Indeed, the conception of religion which he employs *most freely* would mean a perversion of the nature of religion into its exact opposite, a transformation of religion into magic. For that which Barth habitually calls religion is really not religion at all but magic; the attempt of man to attain salvation through his own powers."

As students of Barth are aware, he has insisted on man's utter incapacity to win salvation by his own good works. He has even incurred blame for throwing contempt on the duty of Christian charity and beneficence. We may take it, therefore, that Wobbermin does not suggest any Romish inclination or magical teaching with regard to the sacraments. He means rather that Barth has got hold of a wrong notion about the nature of religion as understood by modern Christians. These are nearer to the Apostolic and Reformed faith than he imagines.

The Bible and "Other Sources"

One of the weightiest passages of the book deals with Protestant teaching on Holy Scripture and Christian experience (pp. 22, 23). A clear line is traced out between Luther and Schleiermacher. There is a mutual relationship between the truth which is believed and the act of believing, "the object and the act of faith, *fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur*." The understanding of Holy Scripture is possible only when full regard has been paid to individual conviction and experience in matters of faith. We cannot understand the Bible unless we place beside it the testimony of faithful souls. They stand side by side, two potencies of history. The testimony of Jesus is confirmed not only by the witness of His saints and martyrs, but by the inward experience of His chosen ones throughout the long ages of history.

If a comparison were to be drawn between these two "mighties," our author goes on, the Bible would, of course, take the far superior place. For the doctrines of the Evangelical faith it is the one supreme authority; but for a right understanding of its contents we require the aid which is drawn from the experience of individual believers. Karl Barth made a tragic blunder when he sought to eliminate the testimony of the believing heart. He has followed Rome by accepting "outside the Bible, although in subordination to it, *other sources* of the doctrine of faith—e.g., (1) dogma, (2) the recognised teachers of the Church, and (3) the so-called necessity of the hour. They all lead in strict logic straight back to Rome. This is true alike of the admission of other sources for dogmatics alongside Holy Scripture; and the exclusion of the experience of the individual believer."

In the daily warfare against temptation, sin and guilt, the aids of that experience are required. The dwellers by a pure mountain stream may be aware that the land owes its fertility to the great river which sweeps past beyond their seeing. Their life is fed from the near and from the distant waters.

As Professor Wobbermin remarks (p. 110), Barth has no clear understanding of the ultimate grounds of difference between the Roman Catholic and Protestant religions. When he describes faith as an empty space or vacuum (Hohlraum) he gives encouragement to the Roman doctrine of *fides implicita*. According to that doctrine the soul of man is a vacant space, ready to receive whatever the Church may choose to teach. The Reformers taught that God alone, as He has revealed Himself in history, is the ultimate object of man's faith.

And besides, we know now that there is no such thing as an "empty space." What we supposed was "empty" we now know to be the home of unseen inexorable powers.

J. T. S.

* *Rechtlinien Evangelischer Theologie, zur Ueberwindung der gegenwärtigen Krisis.* (Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen.)

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A UNITED METHODIST LOSS

All denominations will regard with sympathy the passing of a great scholar and College Principal, Rev. Dr. Clemens, B.A., for nineteen years the head of Ranmoor College, Sheffield, where many ministers, past and present, were trained by him for service in the Methodist New Connexion, and after Union in 1907 in the United Methodist Church. His degree of D.D. was received from the University of St. Andrews in recognition of his notable contributions to Biblical and theological thought, and a number of articles from his pen appear in the famous dictionaries of Dr. Hastings. Dr. Clemens was the youngest student ever admitted to Ranmoor College, where afterwards he became Principal and Governor, the youngest attainer of that honour at Ranmoor. He was the last of the 110 Methodist New Connexion Presidents in the year of Union, and took active part in all negotiations for its success and consolidation.

THE NEW YEAR

(BY OUR PARLIAMENTARY CORRESPONDENT.)

If Mr. Churchill's prognostication is right there will probably be a General Election in 1930. That is not the new year wish of any political party, but events may force an issue. The House of Commons is taking its recess in an uncertain mood. Supporters of the Government have been startled by the fall of their majority on the most important Bill of the year to eight, and yet they knew that they had to depend on the co-operation or neutrality of others. If the Council of State impartial spirit is to permeate the proceedings they should be prepared to yield to the general sense of the House so long as it is not a direct vote of no-confidence.

The Labour members who are complaining of the action of the Liberals do not show the consideration which is necessary under present conditions. Liberals are determined to maintain their own freedom of action. They suffered greatly in 1924 from the taunt that they had put the Socialists in office, and remembering that experience they point out that Mr. MacDonald was recalled this year not on account of a vote of the House but because Mr. Baldwin resigned after the election. They are no more responsible for keeping the present Government in power than are Conservatives who absent themselves from important divisions. They have, however, befriended the Government on foreign affairs when the principal Opposition was hostile, and they gave valuable aid to Ministers in connection with unemployment insurance. They have been very critical in respect of unemployment, but not more so than some of the Socialists themselves.

It is necessary for the Government to recognise the need and the value of Liberal co-operation. There has been evidence of their sense of this duty in the amendments to the Coal Bill announced by Mr. William Graham on the eve of the adjournment of the House. The amendments do not satisfy the Liberals, but they go further than the concessions made during the debate, and the mere fact of their announcement shows a spirit of compromise and not a disposition to risk the loss of the Bill, with all the political trouble that would ensue. It is difficult to say how far the new concessions would have affected the Liberals if made known before the division. Probably some members of the party would have been more reluctant to vote against the Government.

Meantime the Prime Minister is chiefly concerned with the Naval Conference. So greatly are his heart and brain set on disarmament, and so much value do the Government place on the pursuit of their foreign and imperial policy, that they would not lightly give up office or seek another election. Their cares are heavy. India is a cause of anxiety. They enter the new year, however, with hope and energy, and their views with regard to an election, if they have formed any, may not be known till Mr. Snowden produces his Budget. If it embodies a Socialist policy we shall then have the signal for what Mr. Churchill calls a momentous election.

The New Year's Honours List is of an unusual character. It contains the customary official promotions and rewards, but it has extremely few partisan touches. As a rule the list has knighthoods for many supporters of the Government in the House, but on this occasion there is none. The only Parliamentary recipient of an honour besides the new Peer, Mr. Ponsonby, is Mr. Will Thorne, who becomes C.B.E., and everyone will admit that the veteran Socialist deserves recognition from the Crown. Indeed it is said that he might have had some mark of distinction earlier if he had cared for it. Another feature of the list is the inclusion in it of a large number of women. They represent a great variety of interests, showing how wide is the Prime Minister's range of observation, and politicians are particularly pleased by the giving of the C.B.E. to Mr. MacDonald's private secretary, Miss Rosenberg.

There were many conjectures about the new Peers, but scarcely any of the conjectures have been justified in the list of six Barons. It was known that the Prime Minister desired to strengthen the Government in the House of Lords. Mr. Ponsonby was no doubt as reluctant to go there as Viscount Grey was, but like Viscount Grey he has carried out the wish of his chief. Probably his elevation was contemplated when the recent changes were made in the Under Secretaryships. As Secretary to the Ministry of Transport he was not required in the House of Commons seeing that the head of that Department is there. He will be able in the other House to assist in the conduct of the Road Transport Bill, and his knowledge of foreign affairs also will be useful.