

*The Theology of Schleiermacher*, by Karl Barth, edited by Dietrich Ritschl and translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), xix + 287 pp, \$13.50.

This new translation brings to the English speaking world Barth's lectures on Schleiermacher given at Göttingen University during the 1923-24 Winter semester. In addition, Barth's 1968 reflections on his complex relations to the "Father of Protestant Liberalism" are appended (previously translated and published in *Studies in Religion*, 1978). Together these writings give us far more detail about Barth's early and late reflections on Schleiermacher and the post-Kantian milieu. Their appearance at this time will undoubtedly fuel the ongoing debate between neo-orthodoxy and the liberal tradition.

Barth insists at the outset that the clue to Schleiermacher's theology is to be found in his sermons. Given Barth's own preference for preaching and the Word, this hermeneutic choice should not be a surprise. Almost half of the text is devoted to a careful exegesis of specific sermons—with special attention to sermons relating to important events in the Christian calendar. The Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter sermons function to provide access to Schleiermacher's Christology in a way held to be more direct than that found in the systematic presentation of philosophical theology. Needless to say, Barth is not pleased with what he finds.

The central theme of the sermons is that of peace—the peace granted to all who stand in the relation of piety to God who speaks in and through our religious self-consciousness. This peace is to be found not in opposition to the claims of this world but as the fulfillment of our bourgeois existence. Human unity is attained in a psychological/spiritual synthesis. No role is given to decision or conflict since they tend to work against the unity which is promised to all. For Barth, Schleiermacher passes quickly over those elements of the Word which would force us to take our alienation from God more seriously. Schleiermacher's God does not speak to us from above but from the midst of our ordinary and prosaic activity. This alleged "comfort" with God manifests itself in a Christology which sees Christ not as the One who calls us to decision but as the higher humanity which is slumbering in our own heart. The supposed abyss between ourselves and God's revelation in Christ disappears behind the drive for unity and wholeness. The practical result of this identification is the celebration of the triumph of humanity. In reflection on *The Christian Faith*, Barth states, "Schleiermacher's theology, however, is even further afield from the task of Christian theology than Kierkegaard's, for under the pretext of Christian theology it raises a song of triumph to man, celebrating both his union with God and his own cultural activity, and necessarily coming to grief in so doing" (p 230).

In a positive reference to Brunner's reflection on Schleiermacher, Barth sees this drive for unity as part of a dangerous mysticism within the systematics of Schleiermacher. Such a mysticism, with roots deep in pietism, overlooks the absolute difference between the finite and the infinite. Christ becomes little more than an archetype of our future development. A number of key ideas follow from such a view. For Barth, Schleiermacher is forced to downplay such "realities" as: the resurrec-

tion, revelation, miracles, positive eschatology, sin and evil, and the break in history initiated by Christ. In their stead we get an emphasis on: peace and wholeness, realized eschatology, philosophy of religion, agnosticism, sheer dependence on the infinite, comfort, and a metaphysics masquerading as dogmatics.

Barth returns repeatedly to the idea that metaphysical categories influence the ways in which Schleiermacher envisions Christ, Spirit, God, and Church. Barth's assumption seems to be that revelation somehow stands outside of our categorial frameworks and speaks to us directly of the truth of the Word. Schleiermacher is taken to task for intruding hermeneutical principles into his understanding of the ways in which revelation enters history and the community. Of course, Barth never raises the epistemological question as to how we know that revelation exists or whether it actually has validation outside of history and human finitude with its metaphysical commitments. It is simply assumed that such questions must be left aside so as not to stand between us and God's self-presentation. The extreme naivety of Barth's position should be obvious. His accusations against Schleiermacher fail to see that Schleiermacher's careful analysis of self-consciousness recasts the doctrine of revelation in such a way as to take seriously the fact that all revelation is received by a finite self as that self exists within a binding historical horizon. Outside of such a finite horizon no truth or reality can appear. To somehow put revelation in a special category is to do violence to the truth of our situation.

It is fair to say that Schleiermacher reads the Bible in ways calculated to enhance his own theological commitments. Such a general criticism is, of course, facile in that no thinker is exempt from having to make hermeneutical choices as to scriptural paradigms. Schleiermacher's specific choices, however, are of interest. Barth is correct in stressing the Johannine emphasis in Schleiermacher's Christology. Christ is envisioned not as an eschatological or apocalyptic prophet but as someone who attained perfect God-consciousness in an unbroken and transparent fashion. This existential reading of Christ puts the emphasis on those elements in our self-consciousness which are akin to the unity of Jesus. This Jesus does not function to generate miracles which somehow violate the causal order. Rather, he shows us that all of life has a miraculous quality. Further, Jesus is not to be understood as having had a literal physical resurrection but as speaking to us of the power of piety against the forces of finitude. Anything which would drive a permanent wedge between Christ and contemporary humanity is rejected in favor of real or realizable continuities. This does not, however, reduce Christ to something like Feuerbach's "species being" which functions as the true infinite within our own humanity. Barth's repeated attempts to paint Schleiermacher with Feuerbach's brush simply ignore the fact that Schleiermacher, as a good Kantian, took our finitude seriously and did not attempt to climb out of that finitude through an insane over-inflation of human nature. Even in the relation of sheer or absolute dependence we do not become infinite ourselves. Rather, we stand before the infinite in an attitude of thankful piety.

By way of reinforcing his critique of the metaphysical elements within Schleiermacher's dogmatics, Barth attempts to show that all apologetics and all cultural theology end up by deifying human products. To "locate" God in a finite appearance is to import pantheism into the fabric of theology. The mystic and the aesthetic theologian are all too ready to overcome the abyss separating us from the wholly other God of revelation. Theology of culture (as the contemporary form of apologetics) domesticates the reality which theology should approach in fear and trembling.

This recurrent critique of Schleiermacher's theological program should not go unanswered. Barth overlooks the historical facticity of all revelation and all approaches of the God who stands beyond human hubris and self-deification. God does not appear vertically in one moment in human (read as "Western") history but is manifest whenever and wherever the finite becomes open to the ground of Being from which it has itself emerged. These multiple emergences from out of the ground of Being are best sensed in the domain of culture with its rich symbolic forms. To cast God out of the aesthetic and cultural kingdom is to narrow by fiat the ways in which the ground of Being can come-to-appearance. The hubris of such an a priori limitation of God's self-showing should not require amplification. Schleiermacher, with his deeper grasp on the phenomenology of the religious self, was more open to the power of Being in the finite being-thing. This power is manifest with greatest fullness in the works of genius which gather together the horizontal structures of the reigning culture. What Barth failed to realize is that theology of culture does not entail the idolatry which conflates the distinction between the finite and infinite, but keeps the tension alive and healthy by showing that the finite transcends itself whenever it opens out into the ground of Being. In this self-transcendence the finite learns the humility of that which is a cipher—a pointer to that which is not itself a thing or being.

Schleiermacher does not represent the beginning of the historically bankrupt humanization of theology, but stands as the beginning of theology's self-transparency. In his theology of culture, itself emerging out of a prior phenomenology of self-consciousness, he brings us into the region where we can at last integrate the claims of scripture with the relentless horizon of modernity. Rather than turning his back on these claims, Schleiermacher gave us the tools for a genuine transcendence of culture. Yet this transcendence entails an immersion in the forms of modernity in order to fathom their horizontal power and curative spread. To embrace and transform modernity is not to reduce God to the human kingdom but to unleash the full power of apologetics on our current self-understanding. What Barth failed to grasp was the need for a counter-stroke by theology against and for the horizon of the modern world. Theology of culture, as initiated by Schleiermacher, serves to put the greatest possible pressure on culture in order to bring it to its *own* moment of self-transparency. We cannot reimpose the ideals of the Reformation in an effort to negate the deliverances of higher criticism, apologetics, psychology of religion, and systematic metaphysical query.

Barth's retreat into a pre-epistemological and naive understanding of revelation does not represent theology's highest self-grasp, but stands as a curious failure of nerve in the face of greater and greater complexification in the order of culture. From our side we must renew the spirit of that liberal Christianity which welcomes the deliverances of science, history, and a self-confident philosophy. The theological enterprise requires the greatest human talent in an age increasingly pluralistic and fragmented. No longer can we long for some form of direct revelation in a given human individual (Jesus as the Christ), but we must have the courage to be gathered into the multiple epiphanies of the God who speaks to us both beyond and within beings.

Yet a strong word of warning is necessary for those who would correctly wish to renew the liberal agenda. In the quest for that ground of Being which nurtures and sustains all being-things we must be ever aware of the demonic distortions which come from out of that very ground. It is often all too easy to speak of multiple approaches of the ground of Being while overlooking the demonic power of the abyss of Being. This dark side of the God beyond the god of theism becomes manifest whenever the products of culture inflate themselves with divine content and its implied validation. No theology of culture can afford the idolatry which seizes on every passing phenomenon as a sign of its self-justification. Theology itself stands under the judgment which radically rejects the equation of the finite with the infinite. To affirm and yet negate the forms of culture is to stand in that tension which itself comes from the tension granted by the embrace of the ground with the abyss of Being. In this tension, a tension sensed by Schleiermacher and Tillich, theology can purify itself from its past and can fill our broken culture with the power of the New Being which heals all rifts.

By way of conclusion we must reinforce a fundamental tendency in Schleiermacher which is often held to be a violation of the spirit of the theological enterprise. Barth rejects the claim that theology must be systematic or exist in a system if it is to be true to its matter. In criticizing Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith* he states, "But a system is present in Schleiermacher, and it is so in almost *suspiciously* brilliant fashion, one might say, if one compares it with the unsuccessful efforts of the older masters.

The material is forced into a mold. We now *know* why we must speak about this and this and this in dogmatics, and why we must do so in precisely *this* context; this is the charm of the work. There is no place for anything contingent, strange, or indigestible in the statements of the Bible or the dogmas of the church. A sizable dwelling in early Victorian style has often been erected on the meadow that was strewn with erratic blocks, and it has been built of the very same stone, but now trimmed and shaped. Spirit has looked at nature, and invaded, conquered, and subordinated it."(p 190).

For Barth the very existence of a system violates the erratic and contingent reality of God's fitful self-presentation. To formulate one's apologetic insights into such an edifice is to once again assert the "triumph" of man over God.

Such a conclusion as to the danger of system is not, of course, out of keeping with Barth's conception of theological response. But we must take strong exception to his strictures. To force theology into the narrow mode of response to the rare and contingent approaches of a wholly other God is to reduce the human side of the equation to something approaching absolute zero. The vigorous counter-thrust of apologetic theology can ill afford such an enforced impotence. The theological system is not a closure of God's approach but a fitting shrine for the articulation and ramification of that approach. A theological system has the burden of holding together that which otherwise might spin out of control into a nightmare of irrelevance and opposition. To work toward and within an open-ended systematic framework is to honor the ways in which the ground of Being can become actual for the human community. Such a system does not "subordinate" nature by gives it a proper clearing within which it can come to appearance on its own terms. A theological system contains both tension and stasis—dynamics and form. Outside of such a self-regulating system can only be the self-glorifying "revelation" of an alienated consciousness.

In assessing the continuing value of Schleiermacher's systematic enterprise we must allow ourselves to be gathered into this fateful question: How, from our side—the only side that we can know—are we to answer that which comes to us from out of the ground and abyss of Being? Is our answer one which will allow for the continuity between culture and creator, or is it one which will push us deeper into self-alienation and estrangement? In answering this question we determine the future of theology. If we answer as Barth would have us answer we bring about the closure of God. If we answer with Schleiermacher we at long last allow God those appearances which will heal our time.

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