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Editorial

MODERN "RADICAL" THEOLOGY

TO SAY THAT our age is an age of unprecedented theological "radicalism" is to utter a well-worn platitude. We cannot point to another period of Christian history in which received interpretations of the Christian faith were as drastically criticized within the church itself as they are being criticized today. Even the Protestant Reformers, however decisively they may have repudiated traditional ecclesiological views and ecclesiastical structures, for the most part continued to repeat the ancient conciliar affirmations of the Trinity and the Incarnation. While the influential liberal theology of the nineteenth century undertook to extend the Reformation critique to the classical dogmas of early Catholicism, it remained "theistic," "religious," and consequently, whether it really wanted to or not, "metaphysical." Total criticism of historic Christianity was left to philosophical revolutionaries – a Feuerbach or a Marx. In the 1960s, however, the ultimate negation of the Catholic tradition has found powerful expression within the community of faith, and in the name of Christ theologians have announced the advent of "Christian atheism."

"Orthodox" theologians may well be tempted to view this development as a sheer betrayal of the Christian faith to a thoroughly secularized culture. There is no point in pretending that modern radical theology is not, in part at least and perhaps even primarily, a response to the challenge of modern culture. But we should not suppose that its exponents are, by and large, merely trying to be "with it." They believe, as all Christians must, that the gospel has something to say to modern secular man, if only it can be made intelligible to him, and they are prepared to risk daring experiments in interpretation. Even if we think, with Jacques Maritain, that the result is a "hermeneutic evacuation" of the Christian faith, we must also agree with him that their work is "a sincere and tortured witness to this faith" (*The Peasant of the Garonne*, p. 10). Furthermore, we should recognize that, as honest men who are unwilling to teach what they have been unable to make their own, they want to know just what the gospel really has to say to them where they are. William Temple might have been speaking for them when he wrote to Ronald Knox in 1913: "I am not a spiritual doctor trying to see how much Jones can swallow and keep down; I am more respectable than that; *I am Jones himself asking what there is to eat*" (F. A. Iremonger, *William Temple*, p. 162).

Of course, to say all this is not to say that the prophets of modern radical

theology are right. In the judgment of many competent critics, their presuppositions are dubious, their treatment of classical Christian theology is uninformed and irresponsible, and their conclusions are unwarranted. Nonetheless, we cannot reasonably deny that they are wrestling with real problems, which a complacent orthodoxy has too often ignored. Consequently, they must be met with understanding and with reasoned criticism, not with mere denunciation. It is with a view to such an approach that the present issue of this *Journal* has been planned.

The first of the four articles devoted to the theme of "Ferment in Theology" is a real find. Franz Rosenzweig was one of the most important of twentieth-century Jewish religious thinkers – a friend of Martin Buber and a scholar worthy to be compared with him. "Atheistic Theology" explores the common ground of Christian and Jewish "secular theology." Rosenzweig's presentation is anything but elementary, but the persevering reader will learn a good deal from him about the modes of thought typical of modern theological radicalism.

In "Providence in a World Come of Age" John Hoffman offers a sympathetic interpretation and penetrating critique of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity." He adds an interesting discussion of the American theologian Carl Michalson, whose thought he links with Bonhoeffer's, and concludes with some pointed remarks on what he sees as dubious procedures in Christian apologetics.

Russell Aldwinckle's "Christianity and Religion in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*" ranges widely over the "anti-religious" theologies of the twentieth century. In the course of a somewhat complex argument, the author contrasts Bonhoeffer's conception of "religionless Christianity," rooted in Karl Barth's distinction between human religiosity and divine revelation, with Thomas Altizer's repudiation of traditional Christian ideas of God and revelation as in themselves "religious."

At first glance the final article in this group, "The Contemporary Crisis in English Academic Theology," may seem to be merely a discussion of English university curricula. It soon becomes clear, however, that James Richmond has something to tell us about the nature of the theological enterprise itself. In particular, he shows what happens when philosophical theology is neglected. Sooner or later, someone like the Bishop of Woolwich rushes in, without adequate preparation, to fill the gap.

We dare to hope that sympathizers with, as well as critics of, modern radical theology will find that what they read here sheds some light on its sources and basic principles.

E. R. F.

FORTHCOMING ISSUE

Our July number will feature a group of articles on "Renewal in Theological Education."