

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karl Barth. *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002. xx + 652 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-6078-1.

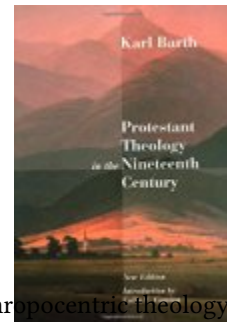
Reviewed by Barry W. Hamilton (Northeastern Seminary Rochester, New York)
Published on H-AmRel (March, 2003)

While casual observers might regard this book as a survey of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* is in fact an extensive theological critique of the foundations of modernity. As such, this new edition of Barth's important historical theology—which focuses primarily on the work of European theologians—can provide help for scholars interested in appraising the development of theological modernism in America. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, theologians struggled to reconcile Christianity with the insights of contemporary thought while others fought strenuously to defend traditional Christianity. In this respect, Barth brings to light the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that erupted in nineteenth-century American denominations as an irreconcilable chasm. Certainly Barth provides a detailed exposition of Enlightenment and Romantic thought; but his work far exceeds the boundaries of historical examination. Barth casts history and philosophy in a theological mold, and the result is a distinct perspective that judges both. In addition, he lumps together a diverse range of figures as theological thinkers. This should signal readers that Barth mines his sources from polemical intentions, and caution them from taking his chapters as representative treatments. Barth's theological interests profoundly influence his reading of sources, to say the least. Regarding his sources as "living voices" since God is "the Lord of the Church" as well as the "Lord of theology," Barth listens for the Word spoken by the living Christ through the Spirit within the Church, even when that Word appears submerged. The reader must keep this perspective in mind when considering Barth's apparently conflicting assessments of these thinkers.

Critically assessing the course of human thought during these centuries, as it addressed the problem of theol-

ogy, Barth carefully details the anthropocentric theology that rose with the Enlightenment, reached its apotheosis in Romanticism, and again embraced the Enlightenment at the end of this period. This anthropocentrism manifested itself in terms of absolutism, a self-confidence that proposed an identity between humanity and God. This self-confidence lies at the root of the explosion of knowledge as a humanistic endeavor. Absolutism became foundational for political philosophy, as the basis for the state became co-extensive with human will (whether the king or the people). The eighteenth century in particular produced a rich harvest of educational philosophy, based on the assumed essential goodness of humanity. Scientific knowledge flourished as absolute human will imposed form on nature, bringing the universe within range of human comprehension.

Barth locates the "problem of theology in the eighteenth century" in the extension of this anthropocentric absolutism, the identification of God within the immanent historical process. Theology became circumscribed within human comprehension, most notably in the requirement that theology be "reasonable," adapted to fit the canons of reason. The essence of God's nature, implanted within human nature, could not stand above reason but was fully co-extensive with comprehensibility. This rationalism rejected miracles and other references to a supernatural element beyond human experience, characterizing these features as "myth" that belonged to an earlier stage of human tutelage. Thus the "humanization of theology" historicized doctrine and internalized Christianity with its concern for an idealized human consciousness. In fact, Barth outlines this period as humanity coming to full consciousness of itself, in the eighteenth century as reason (the Enlightenment platform) and in the Romantic reaction as subjective "feeling" (the



response to Kant's epistemological divide). Thus absolutism brought the universe under the lordship of humanity and banished mystery from its domain.

However, while Barth acknowledges the success of the application of absolutism to other problems, he points out that humanity in its efforts to deal with Christianity on its own terms experienced "hesitation and stumbling." While humanity "framed the question posed to it by Christianity" in terms of the answers that human thought could provide, the questions and answers posed by theology stand over against humanity and authority above and beyond the human race. If eighteenth-century theology produced an answer that corresponded with its own nature, no one did so more perfectly than Hegel. At no point did human self-consciousness reach a higher point than in Hegel's thought, in which Mind (thought and that which is thought) is identical with God. As Barth points out, "Hegel's philosophy is the philosophy of self-confidence." Since humanity could no longer doubt itself, it could doubt everything else. Hegel was perhaps the greatest embodiment of the drive for absolutism. Yet theologians rejected Hegel in his own time, and scattered into multiple directions as they reframed these answers.

At the heart of the limitations imposed by the problem of theology is theodicy, the ineradicable presence of evil in spite of the eighteenth-century's "Pelagian" program to rid itself of the corruption of past ages and return to humanity's essential innocence. As Barth points out, Rousseau declared humanity's essential goodness even as he confessed his own sins. Neither could Kant, whom Goethe accused of having "criminally smeared his philosopher's cloak with the shameful stain of radical evil," avoid speaking of "an evil principle" even within reason itself. Every attempt to force theology into anthropocentric terms failed to address the radical conflict of good and evil that appeared within human consciousness at every turn.

The central figure in nineteenth-century theology was Friedrich Schleiermacher, the "father of modern theology." For Schleiermacher, faith rests on "the basis of a highest knowledge of human feeling or immediate self-awareness in its correlation to God, upon the basis of a highest knowledge of the nature and value of faith and the diversity of ways of believing altogether." He thus transformed *pistis* into *gnosis*, "faith" as fully immanent within the human consciousness. This faith is developed through education and through educating, defined as mediation between experience and history. As Barth points out, "peace" is a prominent motif in Schleiermacher's

sermons, signaling that ultimately there can be no "irreconcilable contradictions and therefore cannot be any unpeaceful state either in general or in particular, outwardly or inwardly." Barth locates in his theology "the point which had come to the center of the entire thought of modern man. This point was simply man himself." Schleiermacher's theology thus compels Christianity to be reconciled with modern thought and the Church to submit to the State.

>From Schleiermacher to Ritschl, Barth presents a curious mixture of "theologians," some of them well-known critics such as David Strauss, and many of them lesser known German pastors who in spite of their biblicalism could never evade Schleiermacher's anthropocentrism. Each in one's own way represents "an abbreviated account of the nature and purpose of nineteenth-century theology." Even the Pietists among them such as Richard Rothe could not overcome tendencies toward a natural theology that could be developed a priori from the human spirit. Nor could a man like Hofmann, who proposed to develop a "factual" theology, escape the influence of Leopold von Ranke's ambition to comprehend history "exactly as it happened." None of them could fully escape Feuerbach's reversal of Hegel's dialectic, in which the human spirit mirrors in the *communicatio idiomatum* the glory of its own humanity. And Strauss's *Life of Jesus* exemplifies this centering on the human spirit by defining Jesus as a model (if not the last or the greatest) of the realization of the inner spirit, and by removing "all that which makes of him a more than human being."

Certainly Barth must take some of his critics' charge that he has forced his selected characters into a predisposed form. The judgments he cast as a theologian serve his polemical intentions, that is, his critique of the high intellectual culture of German civilization that paradoxically contains the seeds of radical evil—indeed Barth writes in the early years of the Third Reich. Contemporary historians would strongly question Barth's claim to allow each source to "speak on its own terms," when his work could be more accurately described as a theological reading of these sources. Students interested in Kant or Schleiermacher should not make this book their starting point, nor should they draw information blindly from its chapters. *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* should be read and quoted within context and in light of Barth's major thesis. Considering the comprehensive vision with which Barth writes, as well as the consequent possibility for misreading him, no one should miss the indispensable introduction by Colin Gunton. Nevertheless, this book retains its place as a splendid example of histor-

ical theology employed in the name of cultural criticism, an indictment of the flawed foundations of modernity.

With these criticisms in mind, church historians can appropriate Barth's insights to evaluate the impact of the Enlightenment and Romanticism on American theology, whether one studies the work of Theodore Parker or William Newton Clarke. Even if one cannot agree with his conclusions, Barth's rich description of the course of theology could help scholars appraise the development of modernism in America, including Boston Personalism and the "Chicago School" that began with

Henry Nelson Wieman. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, theologians struggled to reconcile Christianity with the insights of contemporary thought while others fought strenuously to defend traditional Christianity. In this respect, Barth brings to light the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that erupted in nineteenth-century American denominations as an irreconcilable chasm. And if one agrees with his conclusions, Barth's analysis provides a rationale for the radical individualism that pervades religion in a postmodern culture, as well as for the evanescence of foundationalism.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amrel>

Citation: Barry W. Hamilton. Review of Barth, Karl, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. March, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7326>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.