

## Reviews

WORD AND FAITH, by Gerhard Ebeling; S.C.M. Press; 45s.

The earliest of this miscellaneous collection of theological studies came out first in 1950 as a kind of programme-manifesto when the author took over the editorship of the *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, the main organ for spreading the ideas of the post-Bultmannian circle. Dr Ebeling has since succeeded Emil Brunner at Zurich. The whole of his book testifies to the compelling relevance of his projects for any theologian-preacher and it is most welcome. The translation, by Dr James W. Leitch of Bathgate, is in the high tradition of this publishing-house, though anybody acquainted with the spirited forcible style of the original must grieve at its enervation by the flabby vocabulary of theological English.

In the end it is always the problem highlighted by *Honest to God* that is at issue: the failure of the Christian message to make sense to modern man. And far from spoiling the chances of reunion, as people have claimed, Dr Robinson's book surely offers the handiest starting-point for serious ecumenism, for the task of making the gospel impinge today is the only problem all the Churches are really feeling. It is no accident that Dr Ebeling's book appears in a series called The Preacher's Library; he shows time and again that his whole concern as a theologian is ultimately with making effective preaching possible. What is so interesting is that he broaches the question in a context in which a Catholic theologian could easily collaborate—at the level, in fact, of a renovation of *ontology*. For at bottom what he is saying is that there can be no creative theology except in conjunction with a creative ontology. Dr Heinrich Ott, the successor of Karl Barth at Basel, has gone much further in the same sense, particularly in his sympathetic exploration of the catalytic possibilities of the later work of Heidegger for theological renewal. This is certainly an enterprise from which the Catholic theologian is not excluded a priori, as in the end he must always be from something like Barth's *Dogmatik*.

It is of course impossible to discuss all the exciting issues raised in Dr Ebeling's book. Having referred to *Honest to God* we might as well draw attention to the fine chapter on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's design for the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts; but it is on the manifesto mentioned above that we shall concentrate here. This particular study aims at bringing out the bearing on Protestant theology and belief of the historico-critical method of dealing with Christian documents. It is a manifesto in the sense that the author, who is himself of Lutheran provenance and started out as an ecclesiastical historian, contends that the return to the theological pitch of the progenitors of the Reformation which was initiated by Barth's famous repudiation of liberal Protestantism can end only in an illusory restorationism unless the principle of critical exegesis is

not only admitted but rigorously applied—and that principle is the grand asset of liberal Protestantism. Furthermore, the acceptance of that principle must be viewed as the only true renewal of fidelity to the principle of the Reformation in the modern context. It is the principle of justification by faith alone which is being reaffirmed, if even more radically and far-reachingly, in the admission of critical exegesis. Bultmann thus turns out to be thoroughly Lutheran even and indeed primarily in his exegetical *method*. Dr Ebeling refuses to allow that it is 'just a method'; and his refusal amounts to a denial that it is confessionally neutral and hence to a denial that it can be used honestly by Catholics. It would clearly be rank obscurantism to agree that Catholic scholars cannot practise critical exegesis except by becoming in effect Protestants; but the case Dr Ebeling makes out for the essential connection between the Reformation and modern exegesis is impressive enough to make the Catholic theologian at least wonder what he is doing when he is being 'critical' too (there is surely a similar problem with linguistic analysis).

The turn Protestant theology seems to be taking could easily find its parallel in Catholicism. The return to biblical and reformed theology in the wake of Barth is very like the return to biblical and patristic theology in the work of Mersch, Casel, Jungmann, de Lubac, Bouyer, etc.; and this return, this *ressourcement*, is often represented as a rupture with the philosophising of neo-scholasticism. The analogy between the critical exegesis of liberal Protestantism and the speculative metaphysics of neo-scholasticism is not just that each at its worst is prone to de-mysterializing the gospel but that each at its best faces the problem of the 'distance' between the modern mind and the mind of the Reformers, the Fathers, and the Bible. This 'distance' is definable in terms of the difference between our understanding of reality and the understanding of reality embodied in the ancient documents. It is a difference between *ontologies*, to use Dr Ebeling's term. The challenge he is issuing thus amounts to saying that there can be no approach to the Reformers, the Fathers, or the Bible, which does not proceed from some preliminary disclosure of ontological presuppositions. We have to sort out what counts as real (and hence true) in the documents and we can do this effectively only if we have also sorted out what we ourselves count as real (and true), which means that we must have brought to light our basic assumptions about being. It is just this that a neo-scholastic thinks he is up to in what he calls metaphysics; and it is ultimately the same thing that is going on in all Bultmann's wrestling with the idea of 'understanding'. The mood may be very different; but the matter at issue is the same: the problem of the understanding of reality within which the gospel is declared.

It may shock some people to hear that the place to enter upon ecumenical dialogue is ontology; but in fact there is a whole series of problems at this point which Catholics and Protestants might well approach together. This would be all the more profitable because it is in a difference of ontologies that Dr Ebeling locates the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism. For this same chapter contains a most eloquent statement of the total incompatibility of the

Protestant principle and the Catholic system. We are divided by a different conception of the relationship between the redemptive event and ourselves: 'The antithesis between Catholicism and Protestantism rests on a different understanding of the making present here and now of the historical once-for-all-ness of revelation'. The principle of justification by faith *alone* is the principle of consent to unsecuredness, of recognition that the redemptive event becomes present only in the preaching which evokes faith, and not in the manifold attempt to *secure* it by turning it into a peculiar kind of *thing* which can be met with in monastic life, liturgy, transubstantiation, apostolic succession, etc. In fact it is the classical Protestant reproach that Catholicism excludes the decision of faith. What Dr Ebeling insists on, however, is that Catholicism must be regarded as a perfectly coherent, often rather magnificent and certainly highly 'successful' religion which nevertheless systematically misunderstands the gospel because of the ontological categories in which it grasps it: in particular because of the absence of any true appreciation of the nature of *history* in the framework of the understanding of reality which Catholicism presupposes. It is therefore on an understanding of reality in which the idea of history has a place that everything turns. Catholicism would not have a true enough conception of *event* to realise that the event of salvation can become present only in the event of preaching. Indeed Dr Ebeling says that Catholicism can continue only by refusing to let itself be affected by the understanding modern man has of himself. It is an opinion which has certainly been held by many Catholics: it may one day be recognised as the significance of the present Council (if it is not already obvious) that it has challenged this opinion. Whether that challenge will ever be responded to, at least by theologians, one cannot yet say: there is little sign of the kind of thinking it would require outside the work of Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan. But Catholic theology seems to move along about thirty years behind Protestant theology: if the successors of Brunner and Barth are to get to grips with the renovation of ontology what may we not expect from the coming generation of Catholic theologians?

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SAINT AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO: LIFE AND CONTROVERSIES, by Gerald Bonner; Library of history and doctrine, S.C.M., 50s.

Adolf Harnack, who devoted some of the finest chapters of his great *Dogmengeschichte* to Saint Augustine, expressed the dilemma of which anyone immersed in the study of Augustine must be sharply conscious: 'Whoever wishes to portray the "whole Augustine" (or "the whole Luther"), stands in danger of betraying the "true Augustine" (or the "true Luther")'; for what man's individuality and power are fully expressed in the wide range of all he has said and done? Harnack wrote at the end of the nineteenth century; his death, in 1930, coincided with the year in which the fifteenth centenary of Augustine's death brought forth