

Reviews

THE SPIRIT AS LORD: THE PNEUMATOLOGY OF KARL BARTH by Philip J Rosato S J. *T & T Clark*, 1981. pp 228 £8.95

Most conceptions of God are dull and boring – he ends up seeming far less interesting than human beings. Karl Barth was a theologian who had that ‘sober intoxication’ with God that the early fathers wrote about, and who tried to convey it in his doctrine. He was quite explicit about the need for theology to try to communicate the fascination of God. There is a note of astonishment and enjoyment that runs through his writings and is probably as good a pointer to the truth of the Holy Spirit as what he wrote directly about it. The whole of his work could be seen as his way of communicating what is meant by the Holy Spirit, and at the end of his life he implied this. He said that he could conceive most of his theology as one of the Holy Spirit, because God is ‘totally and entirely Spirit’ too.

Philip Rosato has taken up this suggestion and followed it through. He has done so thoroughly, and has seen and faced the big issues. The result is a book that is a valuable contribution both to the theology of the Holy Spirit, which desperately needs sound thinking, and to the understanding of Barth.

Rosato shows Barth early in his career working out the polemical guidelines of his pneumatology. It must not let God’s spirit be absorbed into the human spirit, as he accused mysticism, Protestant liberalism and existentialism of doing. Nor must it be absorbed completely into Christology, which was his own main temptation, or ecclesiology, which was Catholicism’s. The doctrine of the Spirit that emerges in the *Church Dogmatics* (in which Rosato rightly gives pride of place to Vol IV) is one in which the Holy Spirit plays a vital

role in all the major doctrines, and so lets Barth, usually seen as ‘christocentric’, appear in a new light as a ‘pneumatologist’. The book shows that if any centre is to be ascribed to Barth it is more accurate to point to his doctrine of the Trinity, which structures the whole of the *Church Dogmatics*.

Rosato spends a lot of time simply giving an account of what Barth says, and this is acceptable because of the vast quantity of material through which this theme has to be followed. The crucial development in Barth’s thought is traced to his book on Anselm in 1931. There Barth discovers the logic of God in relation to knowledge of God: God himself assumes subjective form in our knowing of him, and this is the pivot for the doctrine of the Spirit. The Spirit is God’s free expression of himself in subjectivity, able both to preserve the divine initiative against all attempts at human (especially religious) control or domestication, and also to be genuinely in intimate communion with human beings.

Rosato has more admiration than criticism, but yet his questioning is very serious. The vulnerable areas are, inevitably, those in which all theologians are on the horns of a dilemma: how to maintain the initiative of God as well as human freedom; how to let God be sovereign and Jesus Christ decisive, and yet history have the capacity for genuinely new events due to human activity: Rosato is sensitive to Barth’s biases, and his key diagnosis is that Barth’s theology is too ‘logos’-centred. The logos, the word, the principle of structuring and ordering, has played a far larger

part in the Western than in the Eastern Christian tradition. Barth is very Western in his stress on the logos, and it tends to give a sense of constriction to his theology, for all its breadth. Rosato has various ways of describing the consequences: the free, dynamic interaction of God with history and its future is not done full justice by Barth; the interaction of God's Spirit with man's is not adequately allowed for, except in Jesus Christ: the urgency of the social and political future, and the invitation to creative initiative in it, is played down; and the cosmic dimension of redemption, in which all creation is part of a process of new birth, is largely ignored. Above all, the sense of the Trinity as in open dialogue with creation, in which there can be ever-fresh surprises, is lost.

How would Barth reply to all this? Partly, perhaps, by stressing something hardly mentioned by Rosato: thanks. For Barth the supreme expression of human freedom was thanks, the perfect, inspired response to God. Thanks is by definition a 'secondary', responsive activity, but yet that does not rule out endless creativity and novelty within it. Barth's whole theology tries to conceive an infinitely rich divine reality, and he sees both his own theology and the whole of truly illuminated existence as the joyful attempt to express gratitude. God is a being in relation to whom thanks is the perfect, free fulfilment of life, and Rosato's plea for a relative human autonomy might seem to be trying to rescue human freedom not from a threatening competitor but from its ultimate delight.

Yet there is justice in Rosato's criticisms, in which he is joined by many other

commentators. Barth is unsatisfactory on the integrity and growth of human freedom, though his insistence on the non-competitiveness of God with man means that he gets the main lines right. More seriously, Barth's exaggerated logos theology does undermine the novelty and spontaneity within history and, ironically for one whose doctrine of God is act-centred, his concept of God is too static.

Any solution to these problems needs, however, to go beyond both Barth and Rosato. For example, neither of them deals with one central issue raised by my account of God's interaction with the world, the nature of space and time. Barth's concept of eternity as simultaneity is, I think the ontological basis for the lack of freedom, novelty and dynamics in his doctrine of the Spirit. Besides, neither theologian has taken seriously (or joyfully) enough the twentieth century experience of the Holy Spirit symbolized by the rise of a third force in world Christianity, the Pentecostals. The issue of the *power* of the Holy Spirit (central in the New Testament) is one to which neither does justice, though Barth in *Church Dogmatics* IV. 3 on the Blumhardts is on the right lines. The joy of God too is not let be its liberated self, though it does constantly bubble through in Barth.

Perhaps it is only a theology that has been through Barth and modern cosmology and Pentecostalism that is up to the job; but, again, perhaps the very concept of adequacy in a doctrine of the Holy Spirit somehow misses the joke.

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RELIGION AND THE PEOPLE OF WESTERN EUROPE 1789-1970 by Hugh McLeod
1981. OUP pp vii + 169. £8.95 (h/b); £3.95 (p/b).

Almost any undergraduate 'outline' paper covering the history of Europe between 1789 and 1945 will contain a token question on the social history of religion; but few students will attempt to answer such a question, not least because of the absence of a good introductory survey of the religious history of Europe during this

period. Dr McLeod has now filled this bibliographical gap admirably.

He begins by examining the impact of the French Revolution on religious practice in Europe. He then treats the social history of religion in Western Europe thematically, looking at rural and urban areas, the urban middle class and the working