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Revelatory Positivism? Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School by Simon Fisher

Review by: Mark I. Wallace

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The Journal of Religion

identified his enemy, the “man with other man,” a form of man that “necessarily questions and disturbs . . . and kills him at the very root” (p. 371).

VAN A. HARVEY, *Stanford University*.

FISHER, SIMON. *Revelatory Positivism? Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. xv+348 pp. \$49.00.

Barth stood alone among modern theologians in his refusal to acknowledge the intellectual pedigree of his thought. Schleiermacher had his “holy, rejected Spinoza,” Tillich often noted the “good luck” of existentialism for his theological reflection, and Bultmann averred that he had found the “right philosophy” in Heidegger’s analysis of human existence. Yet Barth consistently proclaimed that while his theology was not completely separated from extrabiblical thought schemes, it was in no way dependent upon such schemes (as were the theologies of his colleagues) because it was a free response to what God had said and done in the Bible. While Barth’s peers objected to this (mis)reading of their positions, and while many regard his achievement to be both a transvaluation *and* a continuation of neo-Protestant liberalism, Simon Fisher is to be commended for providing the first sustained examination of Barth’s earliest theology against the backdrop of the regnant philosophy of Barth’s prewar student days, Marburg neo-Kantianism. And while it is beyond the scope of Fisher’s project to argue for the continuing influence of the Marburg philosophy on Barth’s mature thought, implicitly, I believe, such a case can be made on the basis of this book.

Revelatory Positivism? nicely integrates two related topics. The book’s first half examines neo-Kantian philosophy and theology at Marburg before World War I. Though the thinkers associated with this movement (Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp, Wilhelm Hermann) had a strong influence on the ensuing generation of neo-Reformation theologians (Barth, Gogarten, Tillich), Fisher is initially interested in examining the intellectual integrity of Marburg neo-Kantianism on its own terms. Prior to Heidegger and Bultmann (the names best-known at postwar Marburg) Marburg was a center of antimaterialist, Kant-inspired inquiries into the foundations of knowledge. In this scheme, the Marburgers sought to provide religion with a stable intellectual footing: religion is the nebulous source of all moral and aesthetic experience, but not a reliable guide as to what can be known in the world of empirical objects. Hermann, on the other hand, rejected this circumscription of religion within morals and art, and argued instead that religion is given through revelation, is self-authenticating for the believer, and should not be bound to the strictures of any particular epistemology or metaphysics, neo-Kantian or otherwise.

The book’s second half takes up the influence of the Marburg philosophy on the young Barth. The published and unpublished writings examined here are a half-dozen article-length pieces that predate the first edition of Barth’s *Römerbrief*. In this early period, Barth’s thought began with the datum that humankind possesses an innate contact point with God that makes divine revelation possible, self-authenticating, and immune from philosophical critique (themes borrowed from the Marburgers, especially Hermann). Barth maintained that religious consciousness is the locus of this divine-human nexus, and he sought to ground this consciousness, in good neo-Kantian fashion, on the autonomy of human feeling and not on any empirical epistemology or idealist metaphysics. Acknowledging Barth’s postwar criticism of Schleiermacher’s “positiv-

ist" appeal to an already present revelation-in-consciousness, Fisher delights in underscoring the ironic affinities between Schleiermacher's theology and Barth's early thought: "It is the case that if [Barth's later] criticisms of Schleiermacher's positivism are accepted, Barth's own earlier theology is susceptible to exactly the same objections" (p. 318). On this issue Fisher is accurate, but, in fairness to Barth, it should be added that Barth himself was acutely aware of these objections: one of the reasons Barth later abandoned his early correlation theology was precisely because he recognized its kinship with Schleiermacher's project.

Fisher concludes that Schleiermacher, Hermann, and Barth were wrong in appealing to a self-authenticating datum as the basis of their theologies, and while I did not find this criticism persuasive (if theology is not a thinking-after something that is given, a *norma normans*, then in what sense is it theology?), it is a fitting constructive moment to a superb exercise in intellectual history.

This book reminds us to guard against adopting any thinker's self-interpretation of her or his own project. Contrary to Barth's autobiographical reflections, Fisher convincingly locates the Swiss theologian in a revisionary Kantian dialogue that was to have a continuing hold not only on Barth but his subsequent followers and disputants. Fisher's generous approach and economy of style make this book a pleasure to read, and his command of German philosophy in relation to Barth's Marburg theology is a seminal contribution to the understanding of a period critical to the development of modern theology.

MARK I. WALLACE, *Swarthmore College*.

ROBERTS, JON H. *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859–1900*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988. 339 pp. \$26.75.

Jon H. Roberts has written an extremely thorough and well-organized analysis of the public dialogue among Protestant intellectuals over the theory of organic evolution in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Although at times somewhat colorless, *Darwinism and the Divine* does discern important and coherent patterns in this complex cultural debate, and these make it a rich resource for students of American history and culture.

Roberts begins by demonstrating that the central issue in the public dialogue between 1859 (when the *Origin of Species* was published) and 1875 was the scientific validity of Darwin's theories and hypotheses. During this period Protestant clergy and theologians as well as the vast majority of American scientists were skeptical of the transmutation hypothesis as it had been formulated by Darwin and by Robert Chambers before him, and they took both men to task for their failures to follow a "Baconian" (p. 41) method of inductive reasoning based on observation and/or experiment.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century these Protestant intellectuals found themselves without the support of the scientific community (most of which had defected to the evolutionist's camp) and consequently without the endorsement of the culture's most authoritative voice. Between 1875 and 1900, therefore, religious intellectuals focused almost exclusively on the theological implications of Darwinism, and, as a result, the consensus that had existed earlier in the century was shattered. American Protestantism during these years stood divided between those who rejected the transmutation hypothesis outright as