

The Reality of Faith: The Problem of Subjectivism in Theology. By Friedrich Gogarten. The Westminster Press, 1959, pp. 592. \$3.95.

Despite its traditional emphasis upon the Bible as the source of doctrine, Protestant theology has often endorsed one doctrine in particular which is quite unbiblical. The Bible builds its case upon factual, historical evidence. But Protestants, from Luther to Barth, have seldom wholly trusted themselves to a historical revelation. Under the sway of Luther's doctrine of the two realms, they define "faith" in terms of a "vertical dimension" of private experience which by-passes the "horizontal" dimension of history. A name for this ironic tendency has been coined by Richard R. Niebuhr who calls it "the Protestant *cur de sac*".

In *The Reality of Faith* Friedrich Gogarten attempts to define faith in a way that will remove this taint of subjectivity. In order to do so, however, he is obliged to use his terms in a most unusual sense. "Subjectivism", as he defines it, is characteristic not of faith, but of modern science (pp. 117, 180). Considering the scientist's struggle to establish criteria whose validity is independent of private opinion or personal bias, this use of "subjective" is perplexing. If the scientific method is subjective, then objectivity must lie in the opposite direction. On this basis, the objectivity of faith is not threatened but *guaranteed* by the fact that it is private, ineffable, and not subject to standards of verification (pp. 136-154). The reader who has had experience of circular argument, however, may well detect in such reasoning an illuminating case study of the Protestant *cul de sac*.

The book also contains a number of subordinate themes which repay the reader in a more positive way. There is, for example, a refreshing break with the contemporary *cliché* which equates sin with pride. Perceiving that such a definition implicitly puts a premium on self-contempt, Professor Gogarten replaces it with the biblical conception of sin as idolatry, or "exchanging the Creator for the creature". On this view, the attack upon sin is not directed against the deception which persuades men that wrong is right. By putting the emphasis on the conquest of sin, rather than upon its inevitability, such a diagnosis provides a welcome alternative to the more familiar accents of contemporary theology.

Equally biblical is the author's refusal to forfeit the present world to the powers of darkness. The "rulers of this world" are not demonic beings who have been granted a tyrannical dominion for the duration of the present Aeon. They are simply any created beings whom men in their blindness fall down and worship. Their power is real but derived, the consequence of idolatry. True religion brings emancipation not only to the worshipper, but also to his erstwhile idol, restoring it to its rightful place in the plan of creation. The author is guided at this point, not by the doctrine of the two realms, but by the doctrine of the goodness of creation. In thus breaking with the last trace of metaphysical dualism, he adopts a more affirmative attitude toward the world than the traditional Protestant pessimism. When the consequences of this break are fully explored and exploited, it may well provide a way of escape from the Protestant *cul de sac*.

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